

STANDING ON HOLY COMMON GROUND: DESIGNING
AN AFROCENTRIC PRAXIS MODEL FOR CHURCH-
BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN
INNER-CITY BALTIMORE

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A FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
THE DOCTORAL STUDIES COMMITTEE
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
DAYTON, OHIO
December 2011

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ABSTRACT

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The goal of this project was to develop a praxis model to address the ongoing disconnect between the Black Church and the African American community, especially as it relates to neighborhood deterioration, adversely affecting both institutions. This project has focused upon the context of Pennsylvania Avenue A.M.E. Zion Church in the Upton Community of West Baltimore. The Church is, for the most part, a “commuter-congregation.” This project has sought to educate congregants to partner with community residents and institutions to develop common assets. The outcome embraces an Afrocentric understanding of community that compels the church to partner with its neighbors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is the product of a village collaboration that spans time and space. I am indebted to the people of the Pennsylvania Avenue African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church of Baltimore, Maryland for their patience and support during the research and development of this meaningful project. I am especially indebted to my research focus group, namely, rose Jones, Rose Horton, Teresa Stephens, Wanda Best and Gordon Clark. The “Zion Church” is the last of many A.M.E. Zion congregations that I have been privileged to pastor. Each of the previous congregations, from the rural Hemphill and Bush Chapel church in Georgia, to the urban ministries of St. Luke Christian in Dorchester (Boston), Varick Memorial in New Haven, Martin Temple in Chicago and Faith in Atlanta, have given this pastor a safe place to serve and grow into the life’s mission to which God has called me. It all began in the modes church in Worcester, Massachusetts known as Belmont Street A.M.E. Zion Church. They nurtured me, loved me and helped prepare me for a pastorate of prophetic proclamation. I am grateful that I was able to recently take a trip up the East Coast with members of the Zion Church of Baltimore to Belmont Church in Worcester. Belmont Church sent me to Morehouse College on a wing and a prayer. They had taught me to say, “I have a dream.” They gave me the opportunity to follow in Dr. King’s footsteps. I now have the opportunity to help others who have come from the same impoverished background to dream of a Beloved Community in which they are a significant part and player.

I acknowledge the plethora of professors that have inspired me and shaped my thinking about ministry from an Africentric perspective. I was introduced to Black Theology from a practical perspective in the basement of Belmont Street Church by teachers who taught us what the African in A.M.E. Zion meant. This was affirmed and expanded by my introduction to Pan-Africanism in the Martin Luther King, Jr. Chapel at Morehouse College. It was Dean Lawrence Edward Carter who became my first intellectual mentor. He brought together for me the social justice imperatives preached by Dr. King with the rich, cultural heritage of the African Diaspora. He supported me during my difficult periods as a poor student at Morehouse. He gave me the stage on several occasions to find my voice. He allowed me to have my African naming ceremony in King Chapel on a Sunday morning. The ritual was performed by another important linchpin in my spiritual and intellectual formation, Dr. Ndugu G.B. T’Ofori-Atta. Dr. “T” was the first mystical sage I have met. He was the pastor of my adopted church in Atlanta, Shaw Temple A.M.E. Zion Church, and a professor at the Interdenominational Theological Center. I was honored to be one of his mentees and, later on, his pastor. I was blessed to have several prophetic professors who embodies the Africentric ethic of community: Lawrence E. Carter and Aaron L. Parker of Morehouse College, the late Anthony Campbell of Boston University School of Theology, the late Edwin Edmonds of Southern Connecticut State University, Gilbert Bond at Yale University Divinity School, JoAnne Marie Terrell, Julia Speller and Lee Butler of Chicago Theological Seminary, Larry Murphy, Henry Young and Jeffery Tribble of

Garrett-Evangelical Seminary, David Daniels of McCormick Theological Seminary and Dwight Hopkins of University of Chicago Divinity School.

I am proud to be a Garner C. Taylor Fellow of United Theological Seminary. I was blessed to be a part of a praxis community of friends and colleagues committed to helping the Church be faithful to its mission. We were led by two preacher-prophets who ably represent the spirit of Dr. Taylor, the dean of Black Preachers. The powerful father-son team of Drs. H. Beecher Hicks and Ivan Douglas Hicks were valued mentors and interlocutors. The former is one of the greatest preachers of his generation and the latter is destined to follow suit.

I acknowledge the support of my cohort of advisors and trusted colleagues, Dr. Alvin Hathaway, Dr. S. Todd Yeary, and Dr. Guy Williams, Sr. They have provided invaluable guidance and inspiration at several phases of this doctoral journey.

It is not an exaggeration to say that I am nothing without the family that God gave me. I am indebted to my loving and faithful wife, Charlene Mundy McCorn. She has given me the inspiration and support necessary to fulfill my calling as a “doctor of the church.” She has been my constant companion and ministry partner at every station for twenty years. Our children, William Elijah, Maliaka, and John-Charles give me a reason every day to do my best to make this world a better place for them and their children. I love them profoundly and am most appreciative of being a recipient of their unconditional love. I thank them for being patient and understanding when daddy had to spend countless hours in the study instead of spending desired time with them. Hopefully this will prove that it was worth their sacrifice.

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to the A.M.E. Zion Church – The Freedom Church – and the churches that have allowed me to practice prophetic ministry. I am grateful for the pastors who saved my life and shaped my being as a preacher of the gospel, Dr. William E. Kelly, Dr. W. Robert Johnson, III, Rev. Nathaniel K. Perry and Bishop Warren M. Brown.

I dedicate this to the sainted memory of my mother, Bettyann L. McCorn-Coles, my grandmother, Henrietta C. McCorn and my first Sunday School teacher, Louise Bertha Baskerville.

I also dedicate this to the Reverend Dr. Gardner C. Taylor, the “Dean of Black Preachers,” for his sterling example of excellence in preaching, prophetic leadership and ecumenical cooperation. I am honored to be associated with his legacy.

We are standing on holy ground

And I know that there are angels all around

Let us praise Jesus now

We are standing in His presence

On holy ground.

Geron Davis, *We are Standing on Holy Ground*

INTRODUCTION

The multi-layered narrative history of the African American community, especially in urban centers, has been fraught with ambiguity and incongruity, shame and success, tragedy and triumph. It would appear as nothing less than miraculous that many generations of African Americans since slavery and Jim Crow segregation have survived and even thrived in a nation where they were perniciously and systemically dehumanized and demoralized by the state-sanctioned policies and practices of white supremacy and racism. During the twentieth century American metropolises emerged as the new “Promised Land” for African Americans looking for equality, economic opportunity and “the American Dream.” Along with the upward climb came multiple stressors affecting several social institutions, government, financial, political and familial. The proverbial pie had to be cut into more pieces, usually unequal, with the largest pieces going to the most powerful segments of society. Most African American families were kept intact by amazing informal and formal networks of kinship and support. At the heart of those networks has been the Black Church, which has held an indisputable and indispensable position in the historical, cultural, social and political milieu of the American city.

As one of the main facilitators of the acculturation of Black family life in urban centers, the Black Church has performed several meaningful and essential roles. The antecedents of the Black Church and African American community are firmly rooted in the African religious and cultural traditions which were born in Africa and took on new life in America. However, the last forty years has seen a dramatic shift in the role of the Black Church as an advocate and facilitator of African American social progress and stability, notwithstanding the phenomenon of the Black mega church, which in many

cases is conservatively evangelical and conspicuously muted when it comes to African American issues.

The African American community has suffered much calamity in the Post-Civil Rights era. A marked decline in viability and cohesion can be traced to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 and the subsequent riots that occurred in several U.S. cities. The steady disinvestment in the inner city robbed Black communities of valuable assets, institutions, and stable families. Several attendant factors affected the social and ethical composition of the Black Church. Dr. H. Beecher Hicks, the senior pastor of the prominent Metropolitan Baptist Church of Washington, D.C. talks about the dramatic change in the context of the Black Church:

The contemporary Church, however, now lives in a different world. Sadly, the church is losing its posture of influence and is no longer the voice of social justice or the conscience that promotes personal piety or spiritual maturity. Inner cities, once abandoned to 'ghettos' of blacks, are under siege – gentrification has ushered in a flood of whites, gays and the upwardly mobile that has changed the landscape and the pigment of our cities. Nevertheless the social pathologies of the African American community, while disturbed, yet remain pernicious problems. Unemployment, underemployment, homelessness, hopelessness, illnesses, crack, crime – in large measure are yet upon us and, consequently, many have turned from the church. They do not consider the church to be relevant. Many of them are young people who have grown up disconnected from their history, the values, ethics, and mores of previous generations. Dubbed "Generation X" or the "Hip Hop Generation," it is estimated that 40 to 60 percent of African American young men and women are 'un-churched' and will probably only step inside of a church to attend funeral services. Added to this inner city, now suburban, crisis is the displacement of its African American residents as communities are now being reclaimed by the once absent whites. Those blacks who remain are caught in a life and death struggle to maintain a hold on the community and to prevent the total destruction of the institutions that have sustained it.

Throughout the nation the African American Church is often faced with an unveiled hostility on the part of those who seek to wrest control of the community from its historic residents. As diversity comes to the inner city there has also come a new element of racial tension and a sense that institutions (particularly those that occupy a large space and are not on the tax rolls) are no longer desirable. In a word, the church that was once "in," a wanted and needed

fixture of the community, is on the verge of being “out,” forced to find suitable space in a suburban communities that are also beginning to demonstrate their own brand of hostility to religious institutions and other similar charitable and non-profit organizations.¹

The African American community has long relied on the Black Church as an agent and advocate of stability within a hostile society. Currently, however, there appears to be a lack of a concrete strategy of action on behalf of the church because of a perceived lack of information, interest and involvement. Some have concluded that there is a growing schism between the faith community and the wider Black community. The Black Church can be accused of a “benign neglect” of the very communities in which most of them were birthed and belong. A key for renaissance can be found in a recovery of an Afrocentric communal ethos. The goal of this research has been to seek to re-establish a partnership to revitalize and mobilize the church and the community by: sharing our common story, as an African-centered ethic, through the narratives of the residents and congregants; building consensus around our common goals (African “communalism”); and building common wealth (the African/Kwanzaa principle of Ujamaa) by sharing, developing and increasing our common assets. Much of the resources and strategies of pastoral care have been utilized in seeking to bridge and heal the emerging rupture between the Black Church and the African American community. Utilizing the methods of liberation theology and Christian community development, a praxis model has been developed to engage the church in liberating conversations that will lead to reconciliation and restoration. The foundation of this dialogue has been a

¹ H. Beecher Hicks, Jr., Lecture presented to the Gardner C. Taylor Doctor of Ministry Scholars at United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio, August 18, 2010.

spiritually grounded, African-centered worldview of the global community through the lens of the village community, which is to be valued, celebrated, protected and promoted.

Robert Michael Franklin, President of Morehouse College in Atlanta, authored a provocative and compelling volume, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities*. Franklin points out the lack of attention by inner city congregations to the glaring problems of poverty, crime and misery. The Church has the capacity to do prophetic ministry in the midst of “missed opportunities.”² He points out a 2003 report by R. Drew Smith, *Beyond the Boundaries: Low Income Residents, Faith Based Organizations and Neighborhood Coalition Building* which states the following conclusions:

- Two-thirds of the housing complex residents surveyed report having little or no contact with faith-based organizations in the previous year;
- Many congregations report having programs of potential value to neighborhood residents but indicate that church members take advantage of these programs more frequently than non-members; and,
- Roughly two-thirds of the congregations report that most of their members live more than one mile from their place of worship.³

One of the keys to restoring African American communities is an indigenous cultural and spiritual reconnection with the Black Church, and vice versa. In order for the connection to be authentic, it has to be more than transactional – political or economic. The connection has to be anchored in the recovery of a “holy common ground.” At the center of this “holy common ground” is a truly African spiritual ethos.

² Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007, 125.

³ R. Drew Smith for the Leadership Center at Morehouse College, “Beyond the Boundaries: Low Income Residents, Faith Based Organizations and Neighborhood Coalition Building,” Annie E. Casey Foundation Report (November 2003), 2. Available in PDF format at <http://www.aecf.org>.

While many churches have made the overt attempt to infuse Africentrism (the term will be used interchangeably with the word Afrocentrism, first expounded by Molefi Kete Asante), most have been drawn to the current evangelical trends that tend to “de-culturalize” and “de-colorize” the Gospel. There appears to be a direct correlation between racial/social integration and the “de-radicalization” of the Black Church, which Gayraud Wilmore refers to as “the process of lessening social and political advocacy of Black ministers and churches in urban areas.”⁴ The diminishing concern for liberation and social change is a result of the increasing conservatism of the modern evangelical movement adopted by many Black churches. Many Black Churches have eliminated overtly African or African-American symbols, themes, language or images in the interest of becoming non-racial, post-racial or multi-cultural. James Cone, largely considered the “father of Black Theology,” gives a piercing assessment of the state of the Black Church in his volume, *For My People*:

Without a clearly articulated theological position in creeds and theological text books, black preachers and their members have nowhere else to turn for theological knowledge and spiritual renewal except conservative, white, evangelical churches. Of course, some black preachers and lay persons can and do transcend white theology and spirituality, but unfortunately, most do not know how to distinguish between black faith and white religion. And with the appearance of electronic church (on radio and television), black Christians are being lured from their spiritual heritage in black churches to the false gods of the Jerry Falwells of this world. Without a critical black theology...black preachers are left with the option of simply imitating the false gods of the electronic church in order to keep their congregations from deserting the 11:00 a.m. service and other activities of their churches.⁵

⁴ Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 2000 (fourth printing).

⁵ James Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 2000, 120.

The Black Church needs a spiritual and ideological and theological grounding that is true to its African roots. However, praxis, the practical application of theory in a reflexive-active interchange, is most important for the survival and liberation of African American communities. The early beginnings of the Black Church were explicitly African-centered as well as *Christocentric*. J. Deotis Roberts explores the meaning of “Africentric Christianity” in his comprehensive work on the subject:

Africentrism is more than wearing African garments or dancing to percussive African music. It involves more than a cultural revival. It requires a new perspective of life, a cultural conversion. It leads to a new life view and worldview for African peoples. Africentrism builds upon the self-respect and empowerment aspects of the black consciousness-black power movement, the emphasis on blackness that gave rise to black studies and black theology. Africentric leaders give due credit to the contributions of persons such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. Unlike the black power movement, Africentrism seeks to reinterpret our history and reconstruct our culture. It does not rest with slavery or with our ancestry in West Africa; it takes us back to classical African history in Ethiopia and especially Egypt.⁶

How does the Black Church recover its primary cultural and spiritual resource? How does she reconcile her strained and sometimes estranged relationship with increasingly secular African American neighborhoods? How does she lead the restoration of dispirited, depleted, disenfranchised and disinvested urban communities? The answer can be found in the many successful models of responsible congregations that have become cultural and spiritual reservoirs of empowerment, advocating and partnering with communities to create an oasis in the middle of urban deserts of blight and depravity. Building on those examples, this project has sought to develop a praxis model that can be used by a congregation to raise its collective consciousness and engage in practical methods of community transformation. An outcome of this project is the establishment of

⁶ J. Deotis Roberts, *Africentric Christianity: A Theological Appraisal for Ministry*, (Valley Forge: Judson Forge), 2000, vii-viii.

a new board of directors and new mission for a church-based community development corporation. This project seeks to replicate in some ways and innovate in other ways, the contemporary tradition of faith-based community development in urban centers modeled by such successful churches as Greater Allen A.M.E. Cathedral of Jamaica-Queens, New York, Trinity United Church of Christ of Chicago, Illinois, St. Paul Community Baptist Church of Brooklyn, New York, Bridge Street A.M.E. Church of Brooklyn, New York, First A.M.E. Church of Los Angeles, California, and West Angeles Church of God in Christi of Los Angeles, California, among others. Anthony Pinn describes the work of these churches in collaboration:

From the Great Migration to the present the urbanization of black Americans has had benefits, but it also resulted in economic hardships expressed in part through substandard housing. Local churches, recognizing this dilemma, initiated subsidized housing. An example is the Nehemiah Homes Project (of the East Brooklyn Congregations—EBC), developed by fifty congregations in East Brooklyn during the early 1980s and chaired by (then pastor) Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood of Saint Paul Community Baptist Church. Like the biblical figure Nehemiah, who rebuilds Jerusalem after its destruction, this project is concerned with rebuilding black neighborhoods. It is affiliated with the national organization known as the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), which has two aims: (1) to generate the construction of affordable housing; and (2) to develop a national minimum salary of twenty-five thousand dollars. Initially started with modest aims, the group pushed New York City to cleanup neighborhoods, renovate parks, and replace missing street signs. Now the Nehemiah Project is responsible for more than two thousand homes in Brooklyn, made possible through donations from participating churches as well as their denominations. The Nehemiah Project argues that proper and affordable housing ties people to neighborhoods and generates a sense of ownership and pride. This, in turn, counters feelings of hopelessness and despair generated by war-zone-like urban crises.⁷

⁷ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002, 79-80.

In Chapter One the spiritual journey of the author will unfold allowing the reader to experience the hand of God leading a young boy born to a single mother in the urban ghetto into a ministry of social justice and community leadership. In this chapter, the intersection of the author and his current context will be illuminated to demonstrate how God calls, equips, and sends willing servants from disenfranchised communities to speak truth to power and power to the people by preaching an Africentric Gospel of responsibility to the least, the lost and the last in American society.

Chapter Two will address the existing body of literature that speaks to the historical and contemporary actions of the Black Church as an agent of survival and liberation for African American people. This chapter will survey the rich resources of Black Theology, Black Pastoral Care and church-based community development.

Chapter Three explores the historical, biblical and theological foundations of this project. This section provides rational and scholarly assurances that this work is being developed from credible sources. Findings from this foundational exploration will result in the affirmation of existing models of ministry and validate the author's presuppositions toward new paradigms and practices of encouraging congregations and communities into greater participation in community development.

Chapter Four articulates the methodology for the development of the praxis model that is the basis of this work. A biblical mandate for action will be necessary in order to successfully encourage and empower congregations to participate in community development through a model of ministry that incorporates all members. The methodology includes a sermon series and a series of focus group discussions.

Chapter Five reflects the results of the ministry model after implementation. This chapter will take a critical and analytical look at the presuppositions, hypothesis and assumptions of the researcher about church-based community development from an Africentric perspective. From this chapter the author will be able to codify the tangible results of this work and draw basic conclusions based on his findings.

Chapter Six is the culminating chapter of this doctor of ministry project. Here, the researcher speaks openly and candidly about the process of moving toward a ministry of church-based community development. In this chapter, the researcher discusses the strengths and weaknesses of his work, those areas of most significance, the challenges experienced and aspects of this work that might be done differently. In this chapter, the author identifies how this project can be replicated in other congregations and provides recommendations for continued and further praxis.

CHAPTER ONE
MINISTRY FOCUS
SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The ministry of the Reverend Lester A. McCorn is a direct outgrowth of his upbringing as the oldest child of a poor, single mother in the housing projects of Worcester, Massachusetts. It is not a very long distance on the eastern seaboard between Worcester, Massachusetts and Baltimore, Maryland: about 378 miles, geographically speaking. However, the journey for Lester, from a spiritual vantage point, has been arduous and protracted, from adversity to advantage, from pain to promise, from abject poverty to absolute perseverance. Like many African American children, Lester was profoundly influenced by his grandmother, Henrietta Truesdale McCorn. A short, quiet, nondescript divorcee, “Gramma” seemed to have been somewhat isolated from her family of origin. She left Camden, South Carolina in the 1930s to move to Worcester, Massachusetts, never to return, unlike her siblings who maintained a connection to the Southern homeland. Worcester was a medium sized industrial city. It was located in the center of the region and was second only to Boston in size among New England cities. The city’s Black population was less than 5%. Although she had several sisters who settled in the Northeast United States with their husbands and children, Henrietta did not seem to have much interaction with them. By the time Lester was born in 1966, Gramma was already divorced (or estranged, as many Black couples did not go through the official legal proceedings to dissolve a marriage). The family seemed to have limited contact with her former husband, William “Bill” McCorn, although Lester remembered visiting him in his home in “the country” in Millbury, Massachusetts. Lester’s mother, Betty McCorn,

continued the same pattern of isolation from family. Lester's earliest memories of his childhood included Gramma walking him to Edward Street Daycare Center. He and his mother lived with Gramma until Lester was about five. They first lived in an apartment in the historic Black Laurel/Clayton neighborhood in Worcester. They were forced to move when the federal experiment of urban renewal came to the city, wiping out the only solidly Black community in the old New England industrial center, 40 miles west of Boston. It was the first of many experiences of displacement for young Lester.

The two constants of Lester's life were church and school. Both would become very important as his family life soon became unstable and unpredictable. He gained a love for both in those earliest days of life; and both were on Belmont Street. He remembers one of the first books he read by himself was a book of children's prayers given to him by Gramma. He was learning to communicate with God as he learned to read. His mother Betty had married Lester's stepfather, Benjamin Coles. Lester simply adored him and saw him as truly his father. He was the first male to have an impact on Lester. He remembered his dad celebrating his academic progress, even recommending that Lester should skip a grade. Although his dad was not a churchgoer, he would send Lester to Sunday School and ask questions about the day's lesson upon his return. Benjamin and Betty Coles had one daughter, Stacey, born when Lester was six. However, the marriage was rocky and soon ended in divorce. His father walked out of the door with little explanation, never to be seen by Lester or Stacey ever again. Betty was a single parent again.

There became an apparent connection between Lester's education and spiritual development. Two of the teacher aides that Lester had in Kindergarten were May Warren and Mary McBride, who were Christian Education workers at Belmont Street Church. In his early years he met a spiritual giant in the form of Louise Bertha Baskerville, the Superintendent of the Sunday School and Lester's first Sunday School teacher. She was a devout and creative teacher from North Carolina, respected and revered by the membership of Belmont Street Church. She probably had little formal education. She encountered the McCorn children, cousins Jannelle, Sheldon and Sharon, and Lester, as talented and engaging young people. Mother Baskerville took a particular interest in Lester, encouraging him to develop his fledgling oratorical skills in the perennial church school plays. He began to find a voice, and a true love for public speaking. The abilities he was discovering in church translated into a new confidence in his academic development. He was becoming a student leader in the classroom and on the athletic field. He began to attribute his successes to a God who had blessed him for a purpose.

Mrs. Holmes, Lester's sixth grade teacher, was considered the best teacher at Belmont Street Community School. She was a short, white, feisty, social activist and a fierce lover of children. She shared with her children a cosmopolitan dream of America as a place of equality and freedom for all people regardless of gender, color or creed. She saw Lester as representing hope for the future. At the same time Lester encountered Mrs. Holmes he had become a part of the dramatic ensembles put together by the Youth Director, Mrs. Louvenia Meeks, at Belmont Street Church. Sister Meeks had given Lester the leading role in a couple of black history programs. The most notable was the role of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Lester would frequently have tears at the

concluding crescendo of the speech, “Free at last, free at last. Thank God, almighty, we’re free at last!” What moved Lester even more were the tears he saw on other people’s faces whenever he performed the speech. Lester’s pastor, Rev. Kelly told Lester he was going to be a preacher. When Mrs. Holmes heard the speech she saw something so much more. She began to push Lester to make Dr. King’s dream his own dream. Lester played on the baseball, football and basketball teams. He received straight A’s. He achieved primarily because his teacher believed in him. Upon Lester’s graduation from Belmont Street School, Mrs. Holmes had nominated him to be the school’s “Most Outstanding Student.” When his name was called at the school wide awards ceremony, he was overcome with emotion. Lester brought the trophy to Mrs. Holmes with tears in his eyes, thanking her and thanking God. Lester was beginning to believe that God had a special purpose for his life.

Lester’s boost in self-confidence would prove to be much needed. He continued to excel in school. He was chosen as the leader of his class in Junior High School. His mother had been inspired to fulfill her dream of getting a college degree. She left her job as a secretary in a corporate office downtown to go full-time. But she did not really have the means to maintain her responsibilities at home and school. They were devastated when they arrived home to their apartment one evening to discover that they had been evicted. Betty had gotten too far behind in the rent. Lester’s world had been shattered. Gramma was there to help pick up the pieces, allowing Betty, Lester and little Stacey to move in to her apartment with the three other grandchildren (Betty’s younger sister Jane had died prematurely) that Gramma was raising. They were in tight quarters in the housing project apartment, with only three bedrooms for seven people and a mother and a

daughter who did not see eye to eye. They were soon joined by Gramma's youngest son, Uncle Joe, a Vietnam veteran who came back home bound by the alcoholism that crippled his ability to hold down a job. He eventually clashed with his sister Betty. The tension reached a boiling point when Joe threatened to hit Betty. Her family soon ended up in a shelter for battered women and children called Abby's House.

The move to Abby's House was the beginning of a cycle of instability in Lester's life. They would be evicted from at least five other places, landing at the shelter twice. As Lester's world was becoming unhinged, he was building another world of faith through his Church. His involvement in the church provided a grounding and support to his growth. Most of Lester's closest friends from the projects and his school were connected to the Church. He also developed friends on the Boston District of his denomination, including his Presiding Elder's daughter, his first real girlfriend and one of his best friends Harold who was old enough to drive and chauffeur the other teens. In spite of being homeless for months at a time, Lester was able to remain involved in church activities. He led some of his schoolmates to church. He eventually helped to lead his mother back to church.

At the age of 15 Lester began to feel some strange inner urgings while in Church. He began to envision himself standing in the pulpit. He became enraptured with the preaching moment in church while his peers were playing and passing notes in worship service. He was developing a spiritual restlessness that evolved into dreams of being a preacher. His new pastor, Dr. W. Robert Johnson, also began to see and hear in Lester's oratory an unusual gift for a young man. Dr. Johnson encouraged Lester to pursue the ministry. Shortly after Lester turned 16, Dr. Johnson scheduled Lester to give the

Children's Day message. It would be his "trial sermon." He preached from the topic "Good Times," one of his favorite shows, because he saw the 1970s sitcom story of the Evans family in the projects of Chicago as his own story of growing up in poverty but still seeing "a bright side somewhere." The response to Lester's preaching was enormous.

Lester could not escape his unraveling home life. It began to become apparent that Betty was struggling with depression. She could not regain stability or find a job. Lester had worked summer jobs since he was 13. At 15 he had gotten a job at Burger King that he kept for about a year. His pastor helped him get a job as a mail clerk at the regional Equifax office in downtown Worcester. Lester became the sole breadwinner for his family while his mother was mysteriously missing her welfare AFDC payments. At the same time, Lester was attending one of the best public high schools in the city of Worcester. There he began to see some of the relative affluence of families of students who wore high end fashions and drove fancy cars. He was being challenged socially and academically. He began to wonder if he belonged there. When the family was once again evicted from an apartment on the West Side of town, Lester, distraught and desperate, called his pastor. Dr. Johnson picked Lester up and moved him into his parsonage, the first time he lived in a single family house. This changed the course of Lester's journey.

In Lester's senior year he was elected Class President at his predominantly white high school after his classmates heard him speak. This once again boosted Lester's self-confidence. He had a conversation with his Presiding Elder's wife, Mrs. Brown, about college. She suggested to him that he ought to think about attending a historically-black school in Atlanta called Morehouse College. Lester was not keen on attending a black

school, especially one that was all-male! But he was reminded that his hero and “patron saint” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., along with other prominent black leaders, was an alumnus of the prestigious school. He was not sure about Morehouse, but he decided to pursue the idea when he found out one of his best friends from High School, Chris Saunders, was going to apply. Chris was the son of Rev. Richard Wright, the pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church and one of the most prominent Black leaders of the city. Chris’ sister, Nicole, was already a freshman at Morehouse’s sister school, Spelman College, an all-female school across the street. Lester received a brochure from the school with the heading in large, bold print, “Be Somebody. Be a Morehouse Man.” This impressed Lester to seek admission. Lester’s grades were not that strong his sophomore and junior years. But by his senior year he was showing improvement academically, and had extracurricular credits as a student leader and an aspiring minister. He was accepted, along with his friend Chris. This began a major transformation in Lester’s life. Rev. Wright helped to convince the Morehouse College business manager to register Lester with little money, on a promise that he would help raise his tuition.

At Morehouse Lester met the man that would become his intellectual mentor, the Dean of the King Chapel, Dr. Lawrence E. Carter. Dean Carter was the “pastor” of the Morehouse Men. Upon meeting Lester, Dean Carter asked with what denomination was he affiliated. When Lester told him Dean Carter responded that he thought it was commendable that the A.M.E. Zion Church had kept the “African” in their name. Lester knew that Zion had deliberately chosen the African designation, but he had taken it for granted. That fall Dean Carter hosted the Nile Valley Conference, a historic, international event at King Chapel. It attracted Pan-African scholars and other

intellectuals and activists from all over the world. The chief presenter was Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop, the renowned African historian. Other presenters included Ivan Van Sertima and Asa Hilliard. This conference forever shaped Lester's thinking as an African in America and as a African American Christian minister. It was a watershed moment that began to bring together for Lester the meanings of faith and life, religion and politics, history and culture.

One of the participants of the Conference was Dr. Ndugu G.B. T'Ofori-Atta, formerly George B. Thomas, the pastor of Shaw Temple A.M.E. Zion Church in Atlanta and professor at I.T.C. Dr. T'Ofori-Atta became a spiritual mentor to Lester as his pastor and Presiding Elder. Lester would be connected to Dr. "T", as he was known, in many ways. Shaw Temple became Lester's church home away from home. The church family embraced him and encouraged him as a young preacher. One couple in particular became a major support to Lester, Henry and Vivian Brown. Both educators, who were from Montgomery, Alabama, were also committed leaders in the church. They had also been a part of a new church planting effort in Decatur, closer to where they lived. It was led by the Presiding Elder, Dr. William Abraham Potter. Dr. Potter invited Lester to be a part of the fellowship by putting up him up to preach sometimes. When Dr. Potter died the group looked to young Lester to be their Pastor – at 20 years old! However when they arrived at Annual Conference that Fall, the Bishop had another plan. Lester was ordained under "missionary rule," which gives the bishop prerogative to ordain and employ a preacher without a formal process of examination and send him or her to a work for which the bishop deems they are suited. Lester was sent to his first appointments, a two-point circuit in North Georgia. The Browns were disappointed but remained Lester's

adopted “play parents.” He was on his way to be a pastor. Dr. “T” was assigned as his Presiding Elder.

During what was supposed to be Lester’s senior year of college, he had become depressed about his financial woes and inability to continue consistently in school. He had sat out a couple semesters intermittently while he worked part time jobs and pastored his churches. The bishop had “left him out” as the saying goes, when he was not reassigned to his church in Summerville, Georgia because the little church could not pay all of its denominational assessments. One night, feeling totally dejected, while Lester was listening to his radio, a song by the jazz-fusion group Basia came on. The song spoke to Lester in an unusual way:

Hello again it's me
Your shoulder's where I sit
The half, nobody sees
Of a silent partnership
I am here, your helping hand

I'm never far away
The clear view from where I stand
I'll be there if you need me
I am your helping hand
My words, you've heard them all before
It's only for the sake of love

It's gonna be a new day for you
A new day for you
The stars have played their part
The past is gone and done
I have more faith in love
The best is yet to come

Weeping uncontrollably, Lester thanked God for sending him a message of hope: “It’s gonna be a new day.” He believed that God had spoken to him in order to assure him that he was not forgotten or forsaken. He also heard the Holy Spirit tell him that with his

“new day” would come a “new name.” Lester called Dr. “T” about choosing an African middle name, since he was not born with one. After doing research, the name *Agyei* was chosen. From the Akan tribe of Ghana, his new name meant “messenger of God.” On his 23rd birthday, Dean Carter allowed Lester and Dr. “T” to have an African naming ceremony in Martin Luther King Chapel. It was also Easter Sunday. It was a day of Resurrection.

A few weeks after his epiphany, Lester was assigned to the Bush Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church in Winder, Georgia. This was one of the stronger churches of the Georgia Conference. At 24 years old, Lester had become a community leader in Winder when a racially-charged issue was met with an organized mass meeting that Lester chaired. The Barrow County Sheriff had been accused of police brutality, racial and sexual harassment and abuse. He was quoted as saying to a white woman who claimed abuse, “you should be thankful you were white and not a nigger or I would have killed you.” The NAACP called a meeting and the president asked Lester to chair it. He was not totally surprised because he felt as if it was his calling as a socially-conscious minister and a Morehouse Man to lead during this kind of crisis. The County had a legacy of racial hostility and inequality. Few Blacks had stood up and done something about it.

Lester had taken a course at Spelman called “Community Organizing.” It was one of his favorite courses. He did not realize that the principles and practices he learned would be put into use so soon. He prepared for the mass meeting by reading a section in Taylor Branch’s Pulitzer-Prize winning novel about the Civil Rights Movement’s early years, Parting the Waters. Dr. King prayed about what to say at the first meeting of what would be the Montgomery Improvement Association. He started the meeting by

speaking in measured tones, “We are here this evening – for serious business. We are here in a general sense, because first and foremost – we are American citizens – and we are determined to apply our citizenship – to the fullness of its means.”⁸ Lester began this meeting the same way. What was astonishing is that the County Sheriff came to the meeting. Lester, feeling the spirit of Dr. King rising within him as it had done when he was a 12 year old boy reciting his words, turned to the sheriff during his opening remarks and told him that they were demanding an apology and the immediate hiring of African American deputies in his office. If the sheriff did not comply with their demands, they would demand his resignation. For Lester, this was a “God moment.” He felt that it was so much bigger than him and that moment in time. A new organization was formed – Citizens United to Rescue Barrow (CURB) – and Lester was elected its president. The organization won major victories when the sheriff agreed to recruit and hire more African Americans and the largest local bank agreed to recruit and hire African American tellers who would be allowed to be in line for management positions. Lester was beginning to grow into what would be his life’s calling.

Lester began a new chapter when he accepted an appointment to St. Luke Christian A.M.E. Zion Church in Boston (Dorchester), Massachusetts. It was a return home because he knew many of the members of this church from his childhood. He asked Charlene to marry him and become his “First Lady,” moving her from Georgia to Boston. Lester and Charlene worked hard to revive a declining congregation. He also accepted a position as a Community Organizer of a new church-based group called Mattapan-Dorchester Churches in Action. It was a perfect merger of his calling to preach

⁸ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988, 138-39.

and to effect grassroots change in communities. By their second year in Boston, Charlene and Lester had their first child, William Elijah Benjamin McCorn, affectionately called Elijah. He was named after W.E.B. DuBois and Benjamin Elijah Mays, two of Lester's intellectual heroes.

The year that Elijah was born, Bishop George W.C. Walker took notice of Lester's ministry and promoted him to the historic Varick Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church in New Haven, Connecticut, the third oldest church in the denomination. This was a major move which afforded Lester a parsonage and an opportunity to attend the prestigious Yale University Divinity School. Lester saw this as another divine appointment. He became involved in the community, eventually being appointed to the New Haven Board of Education. Charlene received her master's degree in education, while a middle school teacher. They were blessed with the an addition to their family, their daughter Maliaka Kenyetta. Her Swahili name means "an angel that loves beautiful music." The Varick Church grew significantly as a Family Life Center was established and plans were made to expand the physical plant. Lester was able to develop his community organizing and administrative skills in a way that benefitted the church, including the establishment of church-based community development corporation. He was chosen as a "Next Generation Leader" Fellow by the Rockefeller Foundation, which included his first trip to Africa, Johannesburg and Capetown, South Africa. He was honored to meet living legends Bishop Desmond Tutu and Miriam Makeba. It was a dream-come-true for Lester to connect to the "Motherland."

After five successful years at Varick Church, Lester accepted the call to the Martin Temple A.M.E. Zion Church in Chicago, Illinois. It was a difficult transition to

leave a people with whom Lester and Charlene had fallen in love. Chicago was a world-class city with plenty of challenges. It was an exciting place to do ministry. Lester eventually met a young State Senator who came to ask for his support by the name of Barack Obama. They struck a partnership and Lester became a part of his campaign committee for Congress. Sen. Obama's wife, Michelle, also became a partner because of her role as the Vice President of Community Relations of the nearby University of Chicago Hospital. Lester was immersed in the ministry at Martin Temple. He organized a "Transforming Church Conference," co-sponsored by Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, bringing together leaders and practitioners from across the country. He also established a church-based community development corporation to address neighborhood blight and economic disinvestment. The CDC received a state grant sponsored by Senator Obama.

Lester began to push himself near the brink of burnout. He pursued his academic interests, completing a master's degree at Chicago Theological Seminary and entering the Doctor of Philosophy degree program at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. He was struggling to transition the church to a new model of lay leadership empowerment. He and Charlene suffered a miscarriage. Later they were blessed by the birth of their third child, John-Charles Wesley. The load began to take its toll on Lester's emotional well-being. Feeling overwhelmed and tired of meeting the demands of ministry, family, and academia, Lester decided that something had to give. After much prayer, he chose to take a self-imposed sabbatical from the pastorate and focus more on his academic pursuits, primarily to finish the Ph.D. and get a teaching job. Because the denomination did not provide for such, he relinquished his post at Martin Temple. It was a very difficult

decision that many people did not understand. However, Charlene was in support of the decision. They had bought a house in Atlanta as an investment a year before. They moved their family there to begin anew, closer to Charlene's family in Monroe.

Lester had hoped to work at his alma mater, Morehouse College, upon his return to Atlanta. But potential jobs fell through with the new Leadership Center and as a new College Minister with his mentor Dean Carter. Soon after settling in in Atlanta, Bishop Clarence Carr appointed Lester to the Faith A.M.E. Zion Church which had been pastored by his Pan-African mentor, Dr. Ndugu G.B. T'Ofori-Atta, who was now 80 years old. The church was the result of a split from Shaw Temple and had all the emotional and spiritual damage that accompanies such a traumatic event. Despite the challenges, Lester believed that this was a part of God's plan for him and the Church, uniting a "favorite son" with a group that had a new beginning and eleven acres of undeveloped property for a new campus. Lester was afforded several exciting opportunities while Atlanta, including preaching the annual Thanksgiving Service at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, the church pastored by the Rev. Drs. Martin Luther King Junior and Senior. Bishop Carr appointed him a Presiding Elder of a new district. But the conflict within the church was too distracting. He was also struggling to resume his Ph.D. studies at Garrett. The emotional baggage proved to be too much and the "marriage" only lasted three years. However, with the election of his friend, Dr. Dennis Proctor, to the office of bishop, God granted Lester an opening for a fresh start. Bishop Brown, Lester's former Presiding Elder and mentor, appointed Lester to the Pennsylvania Avenue A.M.E. Zion Church in Baltimore, Maryland.

Lester was re-energized by the ministry context of Pennsylvania Avenue Church. It is a vibrant congregation located in a bustling urban center. It was a tall order to fill because it was proud of its prominence within the denomination, having its last three pastors elected to the episcopacy. Much of its ministry was centered on the personality of its previous leader, Dr. Proctor, a gifted and popular preacher. Lester soon discovered the need to rebuild the administrative infrastructure and expand its impact in the surrounding community. He had no doubt that his journey from the projects to homelessness to pastor to community organizer to Christian community developer had equipped him to lead this Church in a renaissance for the ministry and for the historic Upton neighborhood. Lester understood the mission of the church as one that is uniquely situated within a community from which and for which its ministry is responsible and relevant. As Stephen Raser and Michael Dash observe:

Every congregation is located in a particular geographic community for which it must accept responsibility as an arena for mission and ministry. It lives its life at a particular period in time, and context and time are significant factors that affect a congregation's life. Where these influences are not acknowledged and affirmed, a congregation lives for itself, behind closed doors, unconcerned about the realities of its life and the world around it. Congregations have the capacity to affect their context through the ways in which they organize themselves and engage their context. Conversely the environment in which they find themselves affects and shapes the lives of congregations. Contextually aware congregations:

- Have a healthy self-awareness and understanding of themselves;
- Seek to hold institutions in their contexts accountable for the welfare of all persons, particularly the poor and helpless and hopeless;
- Are committed to working with other churches, agencies, and interest groups that struggle for justice;
- Live the life of faith beyond the walls and in the world;
- Engage in analysis through reflection and action.⁹

⁹ Stephen C. Raser and Michael J.N. Dash, *The Mark of Zion: Congregational Life in Black Churches*, Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2003, 64.

CONTEXT FOR MINISTRY

The historic Pennsylvania Avenue African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church is located in one of the most socio-economically challenged neighborhoods in the city of Baltimore, Maryland. Also known as Zion Church, it is one of the most prominent congregations in the A.M.E. Zion denomination. Pennsylvania Avenue Church was founded in the city of Baltimore, Maryland in 1841. The Church has gone through several name changes in its history, having been originally established as an independent Black Methodist congregation and later joining the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church denomination and moving to Pennsylvania Avenue and the historic Upton neighborhood in 1904. The current facility, which houses a 900-seat sanctuary, administrative wing, multi-purpose hall, and several classrooms, was erected in 1977. The 1,800-member congregation is generationally-diverse, with many of the members having been a part of the Church family for 50-plus years. The church operates over 20 ministries. The Church's first non-profit corporation, Zion Outreach Services, sponsored the construction of the adjacent senior residences, Zion Towers, in 1978. Although the Church is nearly 170 years old, it has a somewhat contemporary "feel" to it. The worship experience is very lively, with a full music band, contemporary praise team, and dance ministry. The Church has two worship services on Sunday, at 8 and 10 a.m.

The Upton Community, located less than a mile west of downtown Baltimore, was once considered the Harlem of Maryland. It was the cultural and political hub of Black Baltimore. It is the home of Thurgood Marshall, the legendary first African American Supreme Court Justice. It is also the home of the first African American

Congressman of Maryland, Parren Mitchell and the current Congressman Elijah Cummings. Upton is home to the first African American woman mayor of the city, Sheila Dixon, along with the second African American woman mayor, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. Both women are members of churches in the Upton Community, and rose to the mayor's office after being the President of the City Council. The main thoroughfare of Upton, Pennsylvania Avenue, was home to the most vibrant entertainment and cultural fare of the city. It once housed the famed Royal Theatre, which rivaled the historic Apollo Theatre of New York in the caliber of talent that played that venue and other famous places on "The Avenue," like the Club Casino, Ike Dixon's Comedy Club, Gamby's, and the Sphinx Club. These spots showcased the likes of Cab Calloway, Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington, Redd Foxx, Slappy White and Pearl Bailey.¹⁰ Many remember the glory days of the Avenue. However, Christina Royster-Hembry also notes that it was a strange creation of the racist climate of the Baltimore of the early- to mid-twentieth century:

"While the Avenue may have been the place to be back in the day, it prospered because it existed amid the segregation of Jim Crow-era America. Blacks couldn't go to the Hippodrome or to Baltimore Street for entertainment, and the theaters blacks could and did attend, such as the Royal, were often owned by whites. Yet, within this harsh, segregated world, Pennsylvania Avenue also served as a bittersweet point of pride—the only place in town one might see Hollywood-worthy black names on a marquee."¹¹

It was during this "Renaissance" that the Pennsylvania Avenue Church saw its most dramatic growth, under the leadership of the Reverend George Marion Edwards, a beloved pastor that many of the Church's members fondly remember as the man who

¹⁰ Royster-Hembry, Christina, Baltimore City Paper, "Street of Dreams," February 2, 2005

¹¹ Ibid.

made the church a center of the community. During the 1940s and 50s, the Church had a kind of renaissance that paralleled the cultural and economic resurgence that the Upton community experienced. However, the next three decades saw the decline of businesses, owner-occupied dwellings, housing values, jobs, and two-parent households. It now has the lowest indices of social-economic health in the city of Baltimore. The Upton/West Baltimore neighborhood is the setting for the famed HBO-series “The Wire”, with a tainted backdrop of crime, poverty, gang warfare, drug activity, and political and police corruption. Harold A. McDougall conducted a thorough study of the history of Black Baltimore. He spent a considerable amount of time exploring the West Baltimore neighborhoods of Upton, Sandtown and Druid Heights. McDougall reported,

Blacks in Baltimore remember segregation as a cruel symbol of inequality, but they also remember it as a context for stable black vernacular neighborhoods, with a strong work ethic and closely networked local economies. While well-meaning middle-class black people mobilized, lobbied, and politicked, often, but not always, on behalf of the entire black community, they sometimes lost contact with low-income black people, and so lost sight of their needs and aspirations. The limited results of black electoral achievements demonstrate that formal political empowerment alone is unlikely to galvanize the black community’s informal leaders to root progress and development deep into the underclass. The support networks that once were the greatest resource of vernacular West Baltimore must be recreated. A leadership approach that relies more on networking within the community, and less (or at least not exclusively) on “big bang” political and economic strategies, is needed to create more lasting improvement in the black community, and to include all of its members in the work of change as well as in the rewards of change.¹²

The Church is situated in the middle of this neighborhood, which has gone through a major decline over the last forty years. The previous pastor of the Zion Church, Dr. Proctor, formed what was called Zion Development Corporation, Inc. The ZDC operated an after school program and a computer program for children and senior

¹² Harold A. McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993, 113.

adults. It had plans to build a community center but the plans were delayed indefinitely when there was a change in the Mayoral administration that was favorable to the pastor and the ZDC.

The Upton Planning Committee is the neighborhood association that represents the interest of the immediate community. The 2004 Upton Master Plan gives this ominous assessment of the neighborhood.

In Upton, sixty percent of families with children under five years old are living in poverty. Children who are born into poverty are more likely to be poor as adults. Furthermore, living in a neighborhood where almost everyone else is also poor greatly increases an individual's likelihood of being poor as an adult. The reasons that neighborhood conditions have such a strong influence on individual success vary greatly, from a lack of positive role models to a lack of institutional support systems, but the relationship between neighborhood concentrations of poverty and the ability of an individual to achieve the American Dream is clear.¹³

There is one major development initiative that could dramatically transform the landscape of the Upton community. The state of Maryland is slated to redevelop a new, massive State government office complex on 25 acres of land a few blocks East of Pennsylvania Avenue A.M.E. Zion Church. The State Center project is a \$1.5 billion mixed use Transit Oriented Development (TOD) that includes: 1.2 million square feet of office/institutional space; 3,000 new housing units, and 500,000 square feet of retail/commercial space. While this looks like a favorable economic injection for a community that desperately needs it, it could also be a disastrous gentrification consequence that could displace hundreds of poor and working people, replacing them with middle- and upper-middle class people that have no affinity or affiliation with the history or the institutions of the neighborhood. Community leaders must guard against

¹³ Upton Master Plan, p.

the kind of gentrification that has benefited more affluent citizens at the expense of its poorer citizens. Eugene Robinson describes the effects of gentrification on African American neighborhoods:

Across the country, gentrification has turned dangerous, decrepit, close-in, once exclusively black neighborhoods into hip oases where the most outrageous crime is what coffee shops charge for a few drops of espresso mixed with some warm milk. This transformation is far from complete, it must be said, and there are cities where you could drive around for hours and decide that it hasn't made much of a dent at all. In Chicago, for example, vast sectors of the South Side are still unreconstructed ghetto, while in Baltimore whole neighborhoods of once-tidy row houses are abandoned, boarded up, and rotting away—the postapolyptic cityscape familiar to viewers of *The Wire*.¹⁴

Baltimore has been no stranger to the effects of gentrification as a consequence of major development projects that benefit middle and upper-middle whites. As McDougall observed about Baltimore's previous "big bang" project, the Inner Harbor:

Despite an investment of over one billion dollars, Baltimore continued to lose middle-class citizens, industrial employment, and tax revenue, simultaneously experiencing growth in its low-income population. While tourists were flocking to the redeveloped Inner Harbor, Baltimore's young people were quietly flunking out of school. The black and poor people who occupied the downtown area before renewal were left worse off as their homes and communities were destroyed to make way for large transportation and infrastructure systems that were eventually underutilized by the businesses for which they were designed. Baltimore, the nation's eleventh-largest city, despite a resurgence in downtown economic activity, remains one of the nation's poorest cities, with declining blue-collar employment, a faltering education system, among the highest teen-age pregnancy and infant mortality rates in the country, a deficient health care system for the poor, and a crisis in housing.¹⁵

The pastor of Pennsylvania Avenue A.M.E. Zion Church has been a member of a coalition of proactive clergy, along with the pastors of four (4) other churches, who have advocated for an economic inclusion plan that guarantees jobs for community residents,

¹⁴ Eugene Robinson, *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*, New York: Doubleday, 2010, 122.

¹⁵ McDougall, 114.

with half of the construction jobs going to persons living within a mile radius of the State Center. The coalition, Community Churches for Community Development (CCCD), was instrumental in crafting the plan on behalf of the faith-based community. The State Center project and the planned development initiatives of the CCCD have become a centerpiece of the conversation of this doctoral project focus group. It is the hope that this project will provide the vehicle for building consensus in the congregation to get the Church more invested and engaged in a more comprehensive effort of community building, which includes housing, education, and economic development.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study is situated at the intersection of the corpus of research about Black theology, Pastoral or Practical Theology, African American studies and Black Christian social ethics. The more specific focus of this project is centered on the Black Church's role in serving, interacting, leading and facilitating African American neighborhoods in the twenty-first century. Additional resources are found in volumes about community building, community organizing and community development from a faith-based perspective. A review of the literature reveals a consistent perspective about the indispensable value of the Black Church in the experience of African Americans in this country. There was no difficulty in finding copious information on the subject matter in a relevant and accessible arrangement. A consistent theme found in the literature is the interplay of the roles between survival and liberation that the Black Church has played.

Given the often tenuous encounter of Africans in America throughout history, the themes of survival and liberation have best described the dual role of the Black Church for centuries. A major concern of most of the body of literature is the emerging chasm between the Black Church and the African American community, socially, spiritually, psychologically and physically. The causes of this rupture are debatable. What is nearly unanimous is the fact that this reality is leaving the community without one of its most important resources for survival and progress. The interplay of survival and liberation is summarized explicitly in the work of Carroll A. Watkins Ali, a Black Womanist pastoral theologian. Watkins Ali gives the reader working definitions:

For purposes of this text, what is meant by the term *survival* is the ability of African Americans (1) to resist systematic oppression and genocide and (2) to recover the self, which entails a psychological recovery from the abuse and dehumanization of political oppression and exploitation as well as recovery of African heritage, culture, and values that were repressed during slavery. By *liberation*, I mean (1) total freedom from all kinds of oppression for African descendants of slaves and (2) the ability of African Americans as a people to self-determine and engage in the process of transformation of the dominant oppressive culture through political resistance.¹⁶

Most of the authors agree that the survival and liberation of African Americans is an urgent pastoral theological concern at this point in time.¹⁷ Watkins Ali's work is a primary resource for this study because it gives paramount importance to the role of the church as an agent of pastoral caregiving to persons who are experiencing the ravaging effects of socio-economic racism and injustice, especially in the abject poverty of inner city ghettos. Watkins describes the contemporary African American context:

The current situation facing African Americans is indicative of the fact that the racist backlash has again effectively undermined the progress of the Black struggle. Collectively, the state of Black Americans...is still quite critical. On the whole, African Americans have not been able to overcome the effects of systematic racism. Today the majority of African Americans live under conditions of genocidal poverty. Systematic racism has prevented Blacks from being able to amass an economic base that would ensure that Blacks, as a people, are not disproportionately filling the prisons, unemployed, underemployed, and undereducated, forced to comply with welfare systems, and living in ghettos as we currently are.¹⁸

The works reviewed also highlighted the need to repair two major breaches in the African American world: between the Black Church and the African American community, and between the Black Church and Black theology. The two themes that

¹⁶ Carroll A. Watkins Ali, *Survival & Liberation: Pastoral Theology in African American Context*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999, 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

describe the prescriptive actions of this study have been incorporated as *reconciliation* and *restoration*. The African American community, ironically in post-integration America, appears to be more fractured than the period of racial segregation. The socio-economic class divisions have become more pronounced, and the Black Church has not been exempt. Many Black Churches have become indifferent, if not hostile, to the persons who dwell in the very neighborhoods in which their edifices are located. The Church should be a necessary ally and agent of liberation for poor, struggling and fractured families. The Afrocentric perspectives of culturally-relevant and socially-conscious Black churches are models for redemption. This is the aim of the prophetic Black Church that is called for in most of the works reviewed. Watkins Ali goes on to say:

In light of the potential of African cultural heritage for healing, sustaining, guiding, nurturing, empowering, and liberating African Americans spiritually and psychologically, it is also incumbent upon pastoral theology to reflect upon *reconciling* ministry in a new light. In this respect, reconciling in the African American context is an act of reclaiming, restoring and retaining African philosophy and culture in ministry to African Africans. Reconciling in this respect is also an act of reconciling African Americans to African Americans. That is, reconciling middle-class African Americans to under-class African Americans, and reconciling that eliminates fratricide among African Americans, which has reached epidemic proportions. This is a vital element in the survival and liberation of African Americans.¹⁹

The chasm between Black Theology and the Black Church has been chronicled *ad nauseam*. Black theologians have charged that black churches have abandoned their liberation history in favor of an “ineffectual spirituality” and have abnegated their role and responsibility to confront the racial and economic oppression being experienced by

¹⁹ Ibid., 121-22.

Black people.²⁰ Black churches responded by critiquing the Black Theology project as being reductionist and divisive, favoring Black power to the neglect of the message of the Christian message of universal love.²¹ Black pastoral theologian and homiletician Dale P. Andrews has called the charge by Black theologians a matter of a “missed diagnosis” that has either overlooked or underestimated the power of American individualism on the psyche and practices of African Americans. A Christian social ethics bridge must be built that helps to move people between personal faith and social justice. A return to an Africentric concept of communal responsibility, including social service and social justice, is possible when the dialogue between Black Theology and the Black Church is mutual, organic, and practical. Most of the authors contend that there is a shifting away from the prophetic, liberation ethic of the Black Church. This is a response of two main factors, the impact of American individualism and, consequently, the “bifurcation of the Black community.”²² As Andrews says,

As black churches focus preaching and pastoral ministries on personal salvation, inner spirituality, and religious piety, the ideology of American individualism invades their sense of corporate identity and communal responsibility. The disruption of corporate identity and communal responsibility only increases amid the struggles for socioeconomic advancement conditioned by individualism in a systemically racist society.²³

²⁰ Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 62.

²³ *Ibid.*, 58.

Much of the literature advocates a practical or pragmatic approach to ministry in the context of the African American community that is both spiritually and socially liberating. This resonates in an Africentric spirituality that draws from the rich cultural heritage of the motherland and appropriates it in the contemporary *sitz im leben*. James Evans seeks to make Black pastoral theology more focused on America's most pressing problems, such as racism, poverty, shame, disease and dysfunctional families, probing to their deepest cultural and religious roots in order to bring healing and liberation through ministries of grace, salvation and solidarity. J. Deotis Roberts, one of the "fathers" of Black theology, is pressed to articulate the theological demands of the church leadership as ministers of reconciliation who educate and empower congregants to be a "prophethood" of all believers, requiring repentance, forgiveness and cross-bearing.

There are several actual examples of culturally-relevant, socially-conscious congregations that have been spotlighted in the various studies that were reviewed. Julia Speller observes a few congregations primarily from an Africentric perspective. Nile Harper presents a study of a plethora of progressive, urban ministries in several American cities. Speller profiles,

...a representative sample of these faith communities who have adopted a both/and rather than an either/or posture in balancing their culture and faith. In their ministries, they simultaneously hear, acknowledge, and walk to the rhythm of the drums within but also talk through their congregational life and mission in the words of a liberating gospel that brings life, healing and empowerment. This book will, consequently, profile congregations that have found ways to ignite congregational vitality and sharpen Christian witness through an Africentric spirituality.²⁴

²⁴ Julia Speller, *Walkin' the Talk: Keepin' the Faith in Africentric Congregations*, Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005, xiii.

To be sure, not all self-identified Africentric congregations are doing community development work and not all congregations that are doing community development are Africentric. However, there is a distinctive correlation between Africentric spirituality and ministries of empowerment and liberation. There appears to be a burden in Africentric churches to make a difference in the conditions of the people in their environs, with a global perspective of pain, suffering and injustice that should be alleviated through ministries of transformation. Harper's research discerns a similar set of themes. Of the twenty-eight congregations that Harper studied, an overwhelming majority of them were predominantly African American. Those that were not African American shared some common beliefs about the sanctity of community, the spirit of shared resources and responsibilities, and the sacredness of a shared story. Harper states his book is "an affirmation that innovative, constructive, and faithful ministry is taking place in urban churches, and that his ministry is of such great importance to the life of American Christianity that it should be widely shared."²⁵ Harper's work is consistent with much of the research about socially-responsible and culturally relevant congregations. Their work is:

- Creating more culturally appropriate worship
- Creating more inclusive, spiritually mature community
- Nurturing faith that engages the challenges of city life
- Reaching out to make global connections for peace and justice
- Finding effective ways to nurture and mentor children and youth
- Inventing constructive ways of redeveloping neighborhoods
- Promoting the redevelopment of affordable housing
- Enabling people to recover from destructive addictions
- Strengthening family life spiritually, socially, and economically
- Forming partnerships for resource development

²⁵Nile Harper, *Urban Churches, Vital Signs: Beyond Charity towards Justice*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999, xiv.

- Developing community-based schools²⁶

Finally, the pioneering work of Rev. John Perkins and his Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) gives an organizational framework for the genre. Most Black Churches have done successful community development work without the guidance of the CCDA. However, the CCDA association has helped to mobilize numerous faith-based CDC's and galvanize large resources, financial and material, to help transform many urban neighborhoods. Two of Perkins' books, *Restoring At-Risk Communities* and *With Justice for All*, share the gospel of Christian community development and espouse the principles and philosophy of the movement. The principles are: Relocation, Living Among the People, Reconciliation, Redistribution (Just Distribution of Resources), Leadership Development, Listening to Community, Church-Based, Wholistic Approach, and Empowerment. These principles are related and translatable to the Nguzo Saba principles of Africentric cultural life and spirituality.

²⁶ Ibid., xiv.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Landscaping the roots and branches of a new “Holy Common Ground”

Afrocentricity²⁷ is a necessary approach for African Americans dealing with the contemporary predicament of misery and malaise in most urban neighborhoods, overpopulated disproportionately by Black churches on most every corner. There is an explicit perspective necessary for arousing the consciousness of the preacher and the parishioner, the church and the community. As Roberts states,

As the term implies, Africentrism is a way of viewing reality other than from a Eurocentric outlook. It entails a serious attempt to understand the manner in which Africans have viewed reality in their context of culture for thousands of years before they encountered the Western worldview. African Americans attempt to recover their classical roots through empathy, knowledge, and experience. Through new looking glasses, we peer into this Africentered world to observe what may be useful in our commitment to Christianity. What is useful? What must be rejected? What will enrich and empower our Christian way of life?²⁸

Since Roberts' book is not titled *Christian Afrocentricity*, we shall begin with the Africentric proposal of his work which is based upon the ideological and cultural movement led by Molefi Asante, Professor of African American Studies at Temple University. Africentrism is both a personal self-consciousness and a

²⁷ This term is used interchangeably with Afrocentricity. Molefi Kete Asante is credited with coining the term *Afrocentricity*, purveying the conceptualization. Subsequent scholars have preferred to use *Africentricity*, seeing as more consistent with the continent of Africa and shunning the temptation to belittle the term associated with a hairstyle – Afro.

²⁸ Ibid. 14.

collective/communal consciousness. Roberts summarizes Asante's Afrocentric project in the following way:

1. We need to begin our cultural view of Africa with a study of Egypt, Nubia, Cush, and other ancient African cultures.
2. We need to be Africa-oriented in our study of data; Africa becomes subject rather than object. We recenter and relocate Africa as subject.
3. We need to lay claim to our own culture. We cannot divest ourselves of culture. We will either participate in our own culture or the culture of someone else.
4. Africentrists accept the multiplicity of cultural centers. They do not negate Eurocentrism except when Eurocentrism promotes itself as universal.
5. One is to accept the Africentric outlook as a means for both belief and practice.²⁹

While Black Theology is a vitally important resource for Black Churches that are true to their mission of liberation, as an academic discipline and practical guide, it is not inclusive of the necessary cultural and historical elements that account for African American identity. Ivan Douglas Hicks, a pastor who attained his Ph.D. as a student of Molefi Asante, argues that African Americans must recover the Afrocentric cosmology that was resonant in the African ancestors *prior to* the European Slave Trade and forced African migration in America. Hicks states:

...One could say that the key problem is summed up as dealing with the apparent contradictions inherent in the social activism of African Americans for liberation from white racial domination and at the same time participating in the practice of what is often claimed to be a white religion. What African American theologians have done in the past is to isolate this predicament and claim to have a Black Theology. The issue with the Black Theology as developed so far is that it does not take into consideration the ideas of agency and African-centeredness that are derived from Afrocentric theory...One should be able to

²⁹ Ibid. 14.

see how the concept of God has been used in the earliest texts as well as the way the divine has been operationalized in human activity.³⁰

The Black Church is the cultural and spiritual product of African spirituality. It became the transporter of the creative “soul force” which combated the insidious racism and dehumanization that Africans unwillingly encountered in the Western world. It is miraculous that African Americans were able to survive such gross inhumanity. Before the Black Church became an institution it was a spiritual and theological worldview encapsulated in the hearts and minds of African peoples. As Hicks states,

We were able to make it on the spiritual reserve of the great and profound religions of Africa. Even though the African enslaved in America was stripped of everything from pride and self-esteem to cultural identity, somehow even the greatest of humiliation and degradation could not force the African to forget the ways and the worship of home. This pulse beat of African spirituality has for the African American Church been an aspect of the church’s freedom and expression. African American worship is emotive, poetic and even graceful.³¹

Hicks presents a paradigm for praxis called “Theo-Africology.”³² There are four critical assumptions raised by Hicks in response to the Black Theology Project that has its origins in the 1960s Black Power Movement. First of all, the African American Church has had several surviving Africanisms that correspond to concepts, ideas and styles of the African world.³³ Secondly, the Kemetic (Ancient Egypt) foundation of classical African

³⁰ Ivan Douglas Hicks, *Centering African American Religion: Toward an Afrocentric Analysis*, A Doctoral Dissertation submitted to Temple University, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 2003, 12.

³¹ ³¹ Ibid., 14.

³² *Theo-Africology* is the term coined by Ivan Douglas Hicks. It is the combination of Africalogy and Theology. It seeks to view theology or the study of God through the eyes of the African without regard to transgenerational or transcontinental issues. Ibid., 40.

³³ Ibid., 35.

concepts should be reexamined in their fundamental relationship to ancient Eastern and European concepts. Thirdly, Afrocentric inquiry must be critical of the historical events in the development of the Christian Church and Christian theology. Finally, Hicks proposes a next step for Afrocentric thinking and action:

Thus, one of the major dimensions of the development of Theo-Africology would have to be the principle of empowerment...Africological scholarship should not be done simply for the sake of scholarship. There should be a deliberately humane purpose for Theo-Africology.³⁴

An Afrocentric Christianity is actually in the DNA of the Black Church in America. It is interesting that the first two Black denominations deliberately included the word African in their names: African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. (Several of the first Black congregations established in America also self-identified as *African*.) Founded in the late eighteenth century in the crucible of American slavery in the South and *de facto* segregation in the North, the founders of these movements merged their own sense of spiritual ethnocentrism alongside their emerging institutional evangelicalism. The two denominations, born out of the hypocrisy of injustice and inequality of the Methodist Episcopal Church – one of the first religious proponents of the abolition of slavery – brilliantly synthesized a firm understanding of the Gospel of freedom for every person created as the *imago dei* with their own indigenous perception of what C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya called “the Black Sacred Cosmos.”³⁵ The African adherents to the Gospel in America saw an adept way to be true to their “calling” while calling the white Church into account for its

³⁴ Ibid., 36.

³⁵ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 2.

complicity with an evil and corrupt system. John H. Satterwhite, a past historian of the A.M.E. Zion Church, is quoted in Lincoln and Mamiya's seminal volume, *The Black Church in America*,

“African” and “Christian” in the names of our denominations denote that we are always concerned for the well-being of economically and politically exploited persons, for gaining or regaining a sense of our own worth, and for determining our own future. We must never invest with institutions that perpetuate racism. Our churches work for the change of all processes which prevent our members who are victims of racism from participating fully in civic and governmental structures.³⁶

As the first Black denominations began to assimilate into the mainstream of religious institutionalism in America they emphasized the identifiers of Baptist and Methodist. However, their initial emphasis seemed to be upon their racial/cultural identity as primary self-recognition. Bishop William Jacob Walls, in his expansive history of the A.M.E. Zion Church, deliberately commends the foundation of the denomination in its African origins in civilization and religion as evidenced in the writings and teachings of the prominent “fathers” of the movement. It seems that the early adherents saw their mission as Africans in America to redeem the Church and liberate the world from “defiled” understandings and practices of true Christianity, which had African roots. Bishop Walls cites an African-centered perspective in the work of his early predecessor and champion of the denomination, Bishop James W. Hood, in Hood's book about the history of the Zion Church:

Ever since Simon the Ethiopian bore the cross of Christ, the Negro, whenever sufficiently enlightened, has stood by it. In Egypt, where Christians have been oppressed for ages, and Christianity has been almost crushed out, the Copts, the descendants of the ancient Egyptians or Mizraimites, still cling to the cross, even in that dark land. While skepticism, Adventism, universalism, annihilationism, probationism, and many other pernicious isms are gaining

³⁶ Ibid. 47.

ground among the white people, the masses of black Christians are still earnestly contending for the faith once delivered to the saints. *It was probably the purpose of Jehovah in maintaining the identity of the race in this country, and forming the African Church, to make it a stronghold of pure and undefiled religion.*³⁷ (Emphasis added)

Gayraud Wilmore presents a compelling project for the Black Church to return to its roots by redefining its mission to the world through an “Africentric lens.” This worldview grounds the Christian faith in a particular expression of the Gospel from the vantage of the oppressed – in Baltimore or Johannesburg, in Chicago or Freetown – and connects its practice in the mission of liberation of all people. Wilmore clarifies his definition of Africentrism,

Africentrism is not defining everything in the world in terms of what Native Africans have done, thought, or believed; it is equally focused on the history and culture of African Americans. Nor is it total rejection of the value of European, Euro-American, or any other civilization. It is not an anti-white version of black nationalism. Africentrism is rather a studied openness to the knowledge, wisdom, and spirituality of African and the African diaspora, and the willingness, on the strength of that acquirement, to always ask the question, “What does this datum of insight, knowledge, or experience have to do with the suppression of truth about black people and the oppression of the black world, and to what extent will it detract from or enhance liberation, justice and democratic development for Africans, the diaspora, and all poor and oppressed people throughout the world?”³⁸

Of course, Africentrism is not without criticism. There are many who mistakenly assume that it is simply a “racial” response to European concepts, practices and modes of thinking. It is thusly seen as reactionary and not founded in a legitimate worldview. As Julia Speller points out:

³⁷ William J. Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Reality of the Black Church*, (Charlotte: A.M.E. Zion Publishing House), 1974, 22.

³⁸ Gayraud Wilmore, *Pragmatic Spirituality: The Christian Faith through an Africentric Lens*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2004), 11.

In the minds of many scholars, black and white, it (Africentrism) is seen as reverse racist, antiwhite, culturally chauvinistic, and separatist. Even in local churches, many firmly believe that an emphasis on an Africentric identity is in diametric opposition to an affirmation that upholds an identity in Christ. In an ideal world this would be true. Unfortunately, in light of the continuing struggles of being black in America, there is a need to regain and maintain a positive sense of self and experience a heightened level of individual and communal wholeness that prepares African Americans for engagement in the world as subjects and not objects. Through Africentric lenses, the mandates and commitments of the Christian gospel take on new dimensions. The liberation of African peoples all over the world, for example, ceases to be an exclusive, ethnically centered goal when seen through Africentric lenses that honor and respect the totality of humanity as a divine expression of God.³⁹

Africentric Christianity is an answer to both the academic/ideological system of subjugating African and African American beliefs and practices, and the existential reality of hegemony and oppression (race, class and gender) that is upheld and defended with supposedly Christian arguments, or at least by professed Christians. Since much of this academic blasphemy is either explicitly or implicitly promulgated in seminaries and universities, it is necessary to “reinterpret” African American religious history. Wilmore points out “three unfortunate racist assumptions in some white seminaries and Bible colleges about church history:”⁴⁰ The first assumption is that real, honest-to-goodness church history is the history of the mainstream white denominations and their European antecedents. Real church history, in other words, is white church history. The second assumption is that any serious religious beliefs among blacks must have begun with the Portuguese attempt to Christianize the coasts of Africa from the last quarter of the fifteenth century. The third assumption has been that African American church history, if one concedes that such a discipline does exist, is practically and morally dysfunctional

³⁹ Julia M. Speller, *Walkin' the Talk: Keepin' the Faith in Africentric Congregations*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), xxiv.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 28.

inasmuch as it tends to preserve and encourage the continuing disunity of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church of Christ.⁴¹ These assumptions point out some of the “logical” arguments presented by cynics and critics of Africentricism who see it as superfluous and irrelevant to the Christian faith, not to mention the aims of liberation and social justice. As a matter of course, Wilmore presents three areas of “reinterpretation” of church history in pursuit of a “pragmatic spirituality.”

(1.) The priority of the contact of both Judaism and Christianity with African people, and the recognition of the African continent as the appropriate place to begin a comprehensive chronology of African American religion... (2.) Research focusing on the nature and function of slave religion, its continuity with the African past, and the significant role of the African American churches founded during those days and their continuation in the long struggle for racial advancement... (3.) Challenging the assumption that the religious experience of African Americans is only a little eddy gurgling in the marshlands alongside the great rushing stream of American Christianity.⁴²

To be sure, a reinterpretation of Black Church history in these terms, in the context of African American history, will invaluablely assist in the all-important task of engendering a healthy self-concept in the face of debilitating realities of injustice and inequality in African American communities.

It is certain that institutional, economic and environmental racism gravely affect Black life in inner cities, especially psychologically. An Africentric consciousness goes a long way in boosting personal and collective self-esteem for African Americans. A sense of self-pride and self-determination of African Americans has militated against the effects of racial oppression and injustice. This is one of the positive effects of the enduring communal ethos often credited to the Black Church. It can be traced to an

⁴¹ Ibid. 28-30.

⁴² Ibid. 32-38.

“African spirituality” that defines the bonds of family and community and withstands threats to unity and stability. This spirituality is expressed in, but not limited to, the African American Church. As Christian Social Ethicist Peter Paris states,

The ‘spirituality’ of a people refers to the animating and integrative power that constitutes the principal frame of meaning for individual and collective experiences. Metaphorically, the spirituality of a people is synonymous with the soul of a people: the integrating center of their power and meaning. In contrast with that of some peoples, however, African spirituality is never disembodied but always integrally connected with the dynamic movement of life. On the one hand, the goal of that movement is the struggle for survival while, on the other hand, it is the union of those forces of life that the power either to threaten and destroy life, on the one hand, or to preserve and enhance it, on the other hand.⁴³

The mission of transforming African American communities in inner cities must involve recapturing our African spirituality in a contemporary context. This is a two-fold venture. On the one-hand it involves *reconciling* the rupturing relationship between the Black Church and the Black community. On the other hand it involves *restoring* a sense of “communality” that is central to African and African American identity.

Reconciliation must first involve acknowledgement of a fault and/or violation of the relationship before forgiveness and resolution can occur. In this sense the Black Church can be prophetic in calling out the “sin” of its own negligence and apathy toward the suffering of the Black Community, as well as assess the historical, political and economic forces that have directly and indirectly damaged Black neighborhoods. The Black Church can also be priestly in bringing about healing and reconciliation by extending compassion and concern for the well-being of the victimized and the vulnerable.

⁴³ Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 22.

The bridge between the divide that appears to exist between the Black Church and the African American community must begin with the recovery of African communality, which is central to Africentric Christianity. As Lee Butler points out, “Most Africans think first and foremost in terms of the good of the group, that is, the community. They secondly think of themselves, but only as individuals related to a group.”⁴⁴ Butler goes on to describe the interrelatedness of all things in African communality. The highest community value is cooperation. Even one’s sense of self is related to a collective self. “An individual life is given meaning only within the context of the life of the whole community.”⁴⁵ Every action of the individual has consequences for the entire community. These actions and consequences, in African communality, are all a part of the sacred world. This is very different, if not diametrically opposed, to the Western worldview that separates and demarcates between the sacred and the secular. As Butler states:

One of the leading paradigms of Western culture has been the separation of the sacred and the secular. Unfortunately, African America, as a culture of the West, has also succumbed to this splitting practice of the West. There was a time when it was clearly understood that the church did not simply have its finger on the pulse of the community; rather, the church was the pulsating life-force of the community! Yet somewhere in our history our spirituality transgressed into a segregated worldview by splitting religiosity from social action. It seems we have broken continuity with African spirituality and declared there *is* a separation between the sacred and secular. Delilah discovered our strength in our thick hair of communality and shaved it from our heads.

What was once conceived as a unified whole has been separated into the split personalities of ‘church’ and ‘community.’ One of the results of that separation has been a marginalization of the church, which has increased human alienation. The church has traditionally been the place that helped us to find rest from wandering. In it, we have been able to find home. It has been our place to

⁴⁴ Lee Butler, *A Loving Home: Caring for African American Marriages and Families*, (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press), 2000, 48.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 50.

find acceptance, respect, and family. If the church is pushed to the margins, then the possibility of our finding an end to our wandering is decreased. Human alienation and homelessness are increased if the church remains separate from the community.⁴⁶

In the context of this African communality, which was transported across the Atlantic in the minds and hearts of our African forbears, the Black Church inherited and propagated what Gayraud Wilmore refers to as a three-fold strategy for the African American community – survival, elevation and liberation.⁴⁷ These three motifs were performed both successively and simultaneously throughout the history of the Black community. As Wilmore states:

Throughout their history African American churches have struggled to maintain a precarious balance between racial advancement on the secular front and winning souls on the Christian evangelism front. This has enabled African American churches to achieve three goals: first, to help individuals survive by enabling them, by amazing grace, to subsist in the face of atrocities of white racism; second, to help the race free itself from legal slavery, economic exploitation, and the curse of second-class citizenship; and, third, to elevate the masses, particularly young people, to a level of moral and spiritual integrity through the kind of education in church and school that ennobled the individual and collective life of black people.⁴⁸

The search for a Holy Common Ground for the Black Church and Black community can be rooted in three interrelated concepts that are useful for both parties: African spirituality, Africentric Christianity and Black Liberation Theology. This paper will explore later the concepts more fully within the context of Biblical interpretation, historical analysis, and theological discourse. In order to reconcile the relationship and restore the communal order, a common language must be re-established and an ancient

⁴⁶ Ibid. 64.

⁴⁷ Wilmore, *Pragmatic Spirituality*, 45-59.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 58.

value system must be recovered and re-appropriated. There exist today a few models of “Africentric congregations” which have succeeded in being authentically African-centered in identity and ideology, especially in their sense of responsibility to the African American community. They have achieved this, for the most part, by incorporating and appropriating the Nguzo Saba or Seven Principles of Kwanzaa. Kwanzaa is an African American “holiday that ritually celebrates the African family, community, and culture and serves as a fundamental way of reinforcing the bond between African peoples.”⁴⁹ The principles can be universally applied as values upon which an entire system of living, relating and acting can be instituted for communal life. They form the basis of a holy common ground upon which to re-build and restore a holy, holistic and healthy community.

From the perspective of the African American Church, the Nguzo Saba can be integrated as ideological and practical markers of responsible and responsive Africentric congregations. Julia Speller uses the principles as a method of bringing together faith and culture in a bond of mutuality. While Faith is one of the seven principles, Speller relocates Faith as the foundation of the other six. Faith is not mere intellectual ascent or moral affirmation. Faith is grounded in progressive action and liberating praxis. Speller states, “Within the context of African American Christian congregations...it is imperative that Faith as a foundational principle is explicitly connected to a liberating theology whose hope is in the transforming power of Christ.”⁵⁰ More will be said of this “liberating theology.” Here let us state the seven values as redefined by Speller. First is

⁴⁹ Speller, 7.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 8.

Unity (Umoja). It is redefined as the effort to seek and maintain unity that begins with our relationship with God, affirms our connection to Africa and the Diaspora, and calls forth solidarity among and liberation for all of God's people. The next principle is Self-Determination (Kujichagulia). It is redefined as the ability to define ourselves as daughters and sons of Africa, created in the image of God, and willing to participate in the liberation of those in the Diaspora and the world. Collective Work and Responsibility (Ujima) is to build and maintain our communities as Africans in Diaspora who live in a context of service and mutual accountability in America and the world, strengthened by the liberating spirit of God. Cooperative Economics (Ujamaa) is to believe in and demonstrate a holistic, multidimensional stewardship that values all our resources, including material, human, intellectual, and spiritual, as gifts to us from God to be developed and used in African American communities, the Diaspora, and the world for the good of all people. Purpose (Nia) is to build and develop our communities in ways that acknowledge the sacredness of our collective work of liberation in the Diaspora, and the world and our dependence on God's power and grace to perform it. Creativity (Kuumba) grounds our creative energy in a renewed and renewing relationship with God that restores African American communities and creates new possibilities for commitment to the Diaspora and the world for the benefit of all people. Finally, Faith (Imani) means to always look to and depend upon the presence and power of the reconciling and liberating spirit of God that transcends what we say, do, think, and dream beyond our imagination for the benefit of all creation. These principles will inform and inspire a vision for a renewed faith community and restored society. At the center of this

Africentric Christianity is the liberating power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This Gospel has the power to reconcile relationships and restore communities.

An Africentric congregation is deeply rooted in the community in which it is situated, while being connected to a wider community of the African Diaspora, as well as the global community. Black Churches that are relevant and effective in African American communities see themselves as part and parcel of the aforementioned communities, especially in urban neighborhoods. Robert C. Linthicum describes three different views that churches of any ethnicity can have in relation to the city. One view is the church *in* the city. This church does not feel any particular attachment to that city or identify with the community. “It is simply physically present in that community.”⁵¹ The second view is the church *to* the city and *to* the community. In its self-interest the church realizes that if it is going to exist and survive it must provide services to the community, such as evangelism and social action. Although its concern is commendable, the flaw in this approach is that the church makes the sole decision of what is best for the community, better known as paternalism. The third view, which is the most powerful and relevant, is that of the church *with* the community. As Linthicum states:

There is a profound difference between being a church *in* or *to* an urban neighborhood, and being a church *with* its neighborhood. When a church takes this third approach, that church incarnates itself in that community. That church becomes flesh of the peoples’ flesh and bone of the peoples’ bone. It enters into the life of the community and becomes partners with the community in addressing the community’s need. That means the church allows people of the community to instruct it as it identifies with the people. It respects those people and perceives them as being people of great wisdom and potential. Such a church joins with the people in dealing with the issues that the people have

⁵¹ Robert C. Linthicum, *Empower the Poor: Community Organizing Among the City’s ‘Rag, Tag and Bobtail,’* (Monrovia, California: MARC/World Vision), 1991, 21.

identified as their own. That is the approach in which the most authentic urban ministry is actually done.⁵²

Of course, this view by Linthicum and many other purveyors of community-based ministry models is discerning a split between the Church and Community, the sacred and the secular. This phenomenon was once foreign to African American churches, which were always organically and authentically connected to African American communities. However, the effect of assimilation in American culture has led to this detachment. An Africentric Church is a Church *with* community, while realizing its historic and spiritual character. African theologian John Mbiti states:

To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence. To be without one of these corporate elements is to be out of the whole picture. Therefore, to be without religion amounts to a self-excommunication from the entire life of society, and African peoples do not know how to exist without religion.⁵³

Since there is a religious thread of being running through the veins of African Americans, reconciliation between the Black Church and the African American community should not be a daunting task. The challenge is not getting the Church or the community to be more religious; the issue is getting both to be more spiritually and morally responsible to the claims of the Gospel to bring “good news to the poor” and to “set at liberty those who are captive.”

⁵² Ibid. 23.

⁵³ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy (Second Edition)*, (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann), 1999, 2.

Many African American Churches have realized the inextricable connection between the well-being of the community and the vitality of the congregation. They have embraced a mission of community outreach that is more than a “hand-out” but a “hand-up.” Christian community development in the African American context has become a preferred method of neighborhood revitalization. Nile Harper points out that these churches have moved beyond charity to true social justice.

With this focus on community-building, many churches in city centers are taking leadership in creative ministries of redevelopment. This is especially visible in a number of African American churches, which have gone far beyond providing a safety net of social service. They are rebuilding whole urban communities, creating affordable housing, developing employment, providing community health care, and establishing good-quality schools. What begins as isolated acts of charity, individual actions of compassion, or programs of social service can develop under the power of God’s spirit through creative leadership into very positive collaborative actions for systemic justice, which changes policy and structure that have oppressed people.⁵⁴

An African-centered spirituality provides the foundation for authentic, organic and mutual community. Drawing from the rich reservoir of African communality, churches are able to become responsible “stewards” of the commonwealth bequeathed to them by God. The Kwanzaa principle of *Cooperative Economics* provides grounding for community development. As Speller states, “Cooperative Economics is to believe in and demonstrate a holistic, multidimensional stewardship that values all our resources, including material, human, intellectual, and spiritual resources as gifts from God to be developed and used in African American communities, the Diaspora, and the world for the good of all people.”⁵⁵ A theological and spiritual understanding of community

⁵⁴ Nile Harper, *Vital Signs in Urban Churches*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock), 1999, 5.

⁵⁵ Speller, 70.

focuses the Church on sharing its resources in order to maximize the combined assets of its collaborative entities. Speller goes on to say,

Viewing material, human, intellectual, and spiritual resources as gifts from God shifts the perception of obligation from profits for the community to good stewardship for God. When this obligation is centered on one's community alone it runs the risk of selective distribution and opens the way for exploitation as the rich get richer and the poor remain poor. When the obligation is centered on the Divine, however, it is empowered by a different source. There is a celebration and cultivation of gifts beyond the material, creating a more holistic notion of Cooperative Economics, shifting the emphasis from profit to stewardship.⁵⁶

Speller has played a significant role in one of the best examples of a transformative Africentric congregation, the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, pastored by the Reverend Otis Bakari Moss. This congregation became “Unashamedly Black and unapologetically Christian” under the extraordinary leadership of the Reverend Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., the same prophetic personality that was unfairly vilified as the pastor who nearly derailed the candidacy of President Barack Obama. It is clear that Mr. Obama was drawn to the spirit and mission of Trinity Church and its pastor. Trinity and Dr. Wright proved being culturally relevant and socially and politically active would not be a deterrent to church growth. Andrew Billingsley cites the record:

Quite to the contrary, Afrocentricity seemed to be a major factor enhancing the phenomenal growth of the church. Within 11 years after Wright's appointment as pastor, the membership of Trinity United had grown from 87 members to more than 4,000 members! Such phenomenal growth, along with the Black Value System, catapulted Trinity and Wright into the forefront of national leadership. By 1996, with more than 4,500 members, Trinity was the largest congregation in the United Church of Christ denomination, still a largely white organization. Moreover, the church completed a new \$14 million building only discover that it still has to conduct three Sunday services. All of these

⁵⁶ Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 71.

factors bear strong testimony to the viability of this church even as it seeks to successfully integrate its Christian heritage with its African American heritage.⁵⁷

Billingsley quotes Dr. Wright's reflections upon the Trinity experience in teaching and living an Africentric curriculum:

The pastor says, "For 17 years we have been trying to do Christian education from the black perspective... We have used the curriculum put together by Reverend Barbara Allen and Dr. Yvonne Delk. We have used the curriculum put together by our former assistant direct of Christian Education, (Dr.) Julia Speller; and now we are using the curriculum being developed by Dr. Colleen Birchett. It combines the Afrocentric and Christocentric perspective or foci, giving our young people a weekly infusion of the Bible and a weekly infusion of African American perspectives on biblical themes. It is based on Nguzo Saba, the seven principles of Kwanzaa developed by Maulana Karenga: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith."⁵⁸

After establishing a commitment to its motto, "Unashamedly Black and unapologetically Christian," in creed and deed, the Trinity Church adopted a "Black Value System" which had ten elements:

These Black Ethics must be taught and demonstrated in homes, churches, nurseries and schools wherever Blacks are gathered:

1. Commitment to God
2. Commitment to the Black Community
3. Commitment to the Black Family
4. Dedication to the Pursuit of Education
5. Dedication to the Pursuit of Excellence
6. Adherence to the Black Work Ethic
7. Commitment to Self-Discipline and Self-Respect
8. Disavowal of the Pursuit of Middle-classness
9. Pledges of Community Spirit
10. Personal Commitment to the Black Value System⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid., 181.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 180.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 172-73.

This Black Value System is similarly based upon the African value system known as Maat. Asa G. Hilliard describes Maat in relation to the African world view:

An African worldview is derived from deep study of everything in the environment, including the weather, stars, animals, agriculture, and each other. At the end of that study of the environment, almost all Africans believe that God has given us a book, and the thing that we study is that book. And, if we study it hard enough, God's principles and values will be revealed in what we see. Out of that the core principle that permeates the worldview of Africans—even though they have different names for it and different places—is a value system that sums up in one word everything that they have learned. That value system is called Maat. In some places, they call it mojo, which is where we get the phrase: 'I've got my mojo working.' (Unfortunately, we're so uninformed about who we are that we don't even know the origin of the words we use.) Maat is one of the highest statements of an ancient African value system. It takes seven English words to sum up Maat: truth, justice, order, harmony, balance, reciprocity, and righteousness. You don't study Maat, you must be Maat.⁶⁰

Of course, there are Black Churches doing impressive community development and empowerment that are not as explicitly as Africentric as Trinity United Church of Christ. However, it can said that these churches harbor and herald an Africentric ethic of communalism and mission to the least, the lost and the left out. One of the most effective agents of community transformation is the Greater Allen A.M.E. Cathedral of Jamaica-Queens, New York, led by former congressman and college president, the Reverend Dr. Floyd Flake. Flake and Allen have "purchased a block-long commercial district in Queens and transformed the dilapidated area into a collection of thriving businesses including legal offices, a restaurant, and a drug store with a total value of 50 million

⁶⁰ Asa G. Hilliard, "Liberating the Ancient Utterances," in Iva E. Carruthers, Frederick D. Haynes, II, Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., *Blow the Trumpet in Zion: Global Vision and Action for the 21st Century Black Church*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2005, 66.

dollars.⁶¹ Pastor Flake sees community development as an important extension of the Church's ministry. He states:

Community development in many ways constitutes the essence of an extended and successful ministry. After all, ministry results from people who, in following God, change first themselves and then their surroundings. This process entails changing how people think about themselves, their lives, and their relationships. There is no more powerful tool for developing a community than changing the quality of the lives of the people in that community.⁶²

Changing "how people think about themselves" is one of the attendant effects of Africentric spirituality. The aim is ultimately liberation and empowerment for persons *in* community.

Most of the credit for outstanding community development by churches goes to pastors. It is true that transformative churches are led by transformative leaders, namely pastors and their staffs and key leaders. However, a pastor cannot lead this brand of prophetic ministry without some buy-in and consensus of prophetic and progressive minded congregations. The Black Church has widely been seen as the "all-comprehending institution" of which Lewis Baldwin talked. It is an appropriate view of the Gospel in action. Stephen C. Raser and Michael J.N. Dash observe this character of the Black Church:

The Church is essentially ex-centric. It is God's purpose that the Church move out from the center of its own life to the margins of compassionate concern, where the Lord is already at work. The challenge is ongoing for Black churches, as well as all religious bodies committed to helping people in disadvantaged and distressing situations. There is need to find ways to maximize participation of individuals and groups in congregations. This commitment becomes meaningful as congregations come to grips with the

⁶¹ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002, 77.

⁶² Floyd H. Flake, Elaine McCollins Flake and Edwin C. Reed, *African American Church Management Book*, Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2005, 89.

community among whom their journey is set. They must become critically aware of their community so that their witness is determined by the hard knowledge of concrete realities of the human condition. Congregations must identify with and serve the poor, heal the blind and the sick, and engage in the process of liberating the oppressed.⁶³

An Africentric congregation is characterized by responsible, ethical stewardship in relationship with its understandings of God, the Bible and its history. At the heart of Black worship is the reverence for the Word of God. The Church perceives the authority of its mission as found in biblical preaching and teaching. The Black Church becomes a prophetic congregation when it infuses its Africentric spirituality into its mission and ministry and then reflects upon its efficacy toward transformation of itself and the people to whom they have been called to minister. Robert Michael Franklin offers a framework for prophetic or “public ministry” that leads to transformation.⁶⁴ It has five phases: Phase One – The Ministry of Charity which is focused on direct, immediate relief of pain and suffering; Phase Two – The Ministry of Transitional Support which is focused upon longer-term but not permanent counseling and assistance that facilitates the journey from dependence to self-sufficiency and self-determination; Phase Three – The Ministry of Social Service which moves beyond providing counseling to providing regular services to the community; Phase Four – The Ministry of Justice which is focused upon representing and/or advocating the needs of the people to the public systems and structures of power; Phase Five – The Ministry of Transformation is evidenced when a congregation becomes a leader or co-leader in crafting a vision of the beloved community and the organizing the capital, mobilizing the people, negotiating the systems, and hammering out the details in

⁶³ Stephen C. Raser and Michael J.N. Dash, *The Mark of Zion: Congregational Life in Black Churches*, Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2003, 62.

⁶⁴ Franklin, *Crisis in the Village*, 162.

order to develop new and better communities.⁶⁵ This project seeks to incorporate all five phases of this model in a prophetic ministry of community development.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

Introduction: The Bible and the Social Justice Imperative for African Americans

The First Book of the African American community is the Bible. In most instances the Bible is the first book that most African slaves ever heard, saw and learned to recite and read. It held mystery to Africans for many reasons. Slaves were prohibited by law and custom from reading it for fear that it would “liberate” them. It was the authoritative document of the Christian religion, read, taught and preached from in the white churches they attended. It contained fascinating stories of the vicissitudes and victories of the children of Israel, the soaring oratory of the prophets and kings, and the miraculous accounts of a hero-healer named Jesus. The definitive event of the Old Testament was the Exodus episode, which held a captivating hope for a people experiencing their own brand of existential oppression. Moses and the prophets were the heroes of the drama who were opening acts to the lead actor/hero of the New Testament, Jesus Christ, the great liberator. James H. Evans states:

African-Americans were defined by slaveholders in the nineteenth century as outsiders with reference to the biblical story. In response, African Americans sought to establish their place within the biblical story by identifying with the Israelites – with an emphasis on political freedom – or the Cushites – with an emphasis on cultural integrity. Both of these emphases were supported by their reading of the New Testament, which confirmed their personal worth in the sight of God. Finding their place meant that the African slaves and their descendants read the Bible as an imaginative text that served the self-revelation

⁶⁵ Ibid., 164.

of God and as a historical narrative that confirmed God's active presence in human affairs.⁶⁶

The Gospel message is firmly rooted in the Judeo-Christian traditions of redemption, reconciliation and restoration, especially in the direst circumstances. The overarching narrative of the Bible speaks of a sovereign God who seeks the lost, the last and the least in order to restore order to a world fraught with a chaotic conundrum as a consequence of sin – a violation of the natural harmony of creation (shalom). This message is reinforced in vibrant practices which bring the Gospel to life. The history of Israel points to the acts of God to restore justice and peace in a world of violence. After the fall of humans in creation, a cycle of sin and oppression was born that was perpetrated by those who had once been victims. The laws, commandments and codes of the nation of Israel were instituted to honor God and maintain harmony with God, nature and humanity. Justice was spiritual and social, not merely legal or political. Sacred rituals of worship and sacrifice were instituted by priests for restitution and reconciliation. Over time many of those rituals became perfunctory and were not consistent with a life of respect, honor and reverence for God and humanity. It was necessary for God to speak words of correction through the prophets in order to salvage the nation and resume the plan of establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. Pastor Walter Malone describes this biblical-ethical imperative:

Although the children of Israel were called upon to constitute a new community of faith after their deliverance from bondage in Egypt, they became susceptible to the idolatry of greed, and perpetuated economic injustice against each other. As God was against Pharaoh in Egypt, at this point God would be against the house of Israel for their social injustice and economic oppression. During the middle of the eighth century B.C., political success and economic

⁶⁶ James H. Evans, Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1992, 51.

prosperity reached one of its zeniths in the history of Israel. But it was at this moment in history that God sent prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Micah to speak against the nation because Israel had become wealthy by oppressing the poor. Both Isaiah and Amos reminded Israel that God demanded more than formalism and ritualism in worship. God demands justice for the poor and oppressed, and without this, Israel's worship would not be acceptable. It was Isaiah who declared to Israel that the Lord said, 'Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and Sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting.' 'Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.' (Isaiah 1:13, 17) And it is Amos who comes down to Bethel and says to Israel, God told me to tell you, 'I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.' (Amos 5:21-24)⁶⁷

Both the Old and New Testaments point to a "preferential option for the poor."

Codes and customs were enforced to protect and provide for the "least of these." These measures were put in place to ensure balance in the community. The role of the prophets was to remind the nation of its obligation to the widows, poor and orphans. The prophet Isaiah makes a direct correlation between righteous worship and social justice:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. They you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. 'If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your

⁶⁷ Walter Malone, Jr., "The Black Church and Community Economic Empowerment through a Community Development Corporation" (D.Min. thesis, United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio, 1993), 28-29.

people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called the Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.⁶⁸

OLD TESTAMENT

Can These Bones Live?: A Spiritual Vision for Restoration of the African American Community

¹The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” I said, “Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”

⁴Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!’” ⁵This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath^[a] enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.”

⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

⁹Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” ¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

¹¹Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’” ¹²Therefore prophecy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.’” ⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Isaiah 58:6-12.

⁶⁹ Ezekiel 37:1-14, NIV.

One of the dominant themes for the people of Israel is restoration – spiritual, physical and moral. And one of the most dramatic portrayals of that theme is the narrative of the prophet Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones, found in chapter 37. Ezekiel himself was an extraordinary individual. A mystic with a vision, he was able to utilize channels of communication not normally available to others. Like prophets before him, Ezekiel was called to bring a message of repentance and obedience to divine will upon the Israelites return from Babylonian exile. Unlike Jeremiah and Isaiah, Ezekiel's emphasis is not judgment, but on comforting. From an ancient concentration camp near Babylon, Ezekiel writes his prophecies to encourage the Jewish exiles.

Ezekiel was a younger contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah. His prophetic mission is to warn the “house of Israel” of pending ruin. He preaches his message to Judah and Jerusalem, making known Jerusalem's abominations.⁷⁰ After the fall of Jerusalem and Judah the messages of comfort in chapters 34-48 are addressed to Jews scattered all over the world rather than specifically to those newly exiled in Babylonia.⁷¹ Ezekiel was a man of the people, despite his priestly descent, well acquainted with the social, economic, political and religious aspects of Judah's life. The book of Ezekiel contains four visions: the glory in the storm cloud (Chapters 1-3), the eating of a scroll held in Yahweh's hand (Chapter 2:8 – Chapter 3:3), the coming destruction of Jerusalem (Chapter 9); and the resurrection of the nation (Chapter 37:1-14). The latter is a biblical paradigm for community reconciliation and restoration. Ezekiel's preaching connects holiness to moral responsibility and communal accountability just as the bones are

⁷⁰ Ezekiel 16:2; 22:2

⁷¹ Charles M. Laymon, editor, *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989, 411.

miraculously linked one to another. This miracle gives Israel hope of divine renewal manifested in national restoration. Roland Harrison states:

Earlier prophets had proclaimed that the very concept of divine holiness demanded the rejection of rebellious Israel, if only for a short period. Ezekiel, however, argued conversely that this same holiness rendered the ultimate restoration of the nation inevitable, since divine honor was bound up with the destiny of Israel. The promise of restoration itself constituted an act of divine grace which would lead to repentance on the part of the faithful minority among the exiles (Ezekiel 36:16ff). With an act of cleansing and the creation of a new spiritual attitude of mind, the process of regeneration would commence in earnest. Only then could the dry bones of Israel (Ezekiel 37:1ff), horribly and helplessly abandoned heretofore, become clothed with flesh through the action of the divine spirit and live, quickened to a regenerate life.⁷²

This story is one of the most mystifying texts of the Judeo-Christian Canon and one of most captivating stories in the African American preaching tradition. In a modern context, Ezekiel can be seen as a minister called to serve in the Valley of Dry Bones. Many of the neighborhoods of Black communities have the appearance of a Valley of Dry Bones. There is dearth, destruction, depression, death and desolation. There is seen the remains of a once vibrant community and the shadow of a formerly overachieving people who have moved “up from slavery” and de jure segregation. We often lament this reality, but seldom address it with relevant, liberating ministries and programs that seek to transform the conditions. In the A.M.E. Zion Church, as in many denominational conferences on an annual basis we give something called “the State of the Church” and “the State of the Country” reports. We often cite the problems, plagues and predicaments of the African American Church in general and our denomination in particular. We sometimes list some recommendations for action. But rarely do we ever follow up with

⁷² Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Peabody, Massachusetts: Prince Press, 1999, 853.

concrete, measurable strategies for implementation and transformation. This is an ongoing challenge for the Church – long on rhetoric and short on execution.

Ezekiel was appointed by his “Bishop” to a valley where the bones were very dry. This suggests something about the bones and the state of the valley. This is a long standing problem that has endured more than one generation. Notice that Ezekiel was not instructed to analyze the bones, or assess the bones, or account for the bones. He was instructed to ADDRESS the bones. God sensitizes the prophet by sending him to the Valley. He does not do it to pique his curiosity but to prick his conscience. You do not have anything to SAY if you have not had anything to SEE. We may not have realized it lately, but our church is in the Valley. It is not time for analysis. It is time for action.

I am sure Ezekiel wanted to ask some questions: How did these bones die? How did they end up like this? How did they end up here? Who let this happen to these bones? Is anyone accountable to these bones? Did anyone care about these bones? God gives a rejoinder to Ezekiel internal inquiries. It becomes clear that the restoration of the nation and the resurrection of the people are contingent upon the connection of holy people with the Holy Spirit. The key to transforming our decimated conclaves of dry bones is a life-transforming experience with the power of the Holy Spirit. That Spirit in turn will lead us to speak a Word of New Life. Although it looks dire, drear, and dry we still have an obligation to say something to the bones. Relevant Proclamation is contingent upon proximity and sensitivity, which leads to receptivity and connectivity. There is a troubling correlation between our religious fervor and social apathy. Dr. Martin Luther King once said, “Any religion that professes to be concerned about the

soul, but is unconcerned about the conditions that damage the soul is a dry-as-dust religion.”

In this text we can perceive these dry bones in three ways: First, they are *Dead Bones*. They are spiritually lifeless because they have become disconnected from their life source. They are isolated from the spiritual reservoirs that once nourished them, like the rich religious oases of the Temple community. Secondly, they are *Despondent and Dejected Bones*. They have suffered so much loss that they have given up hope of ever returning to the Promised Land of abundance and prosperity. Their community has been systemically underdeveloped and disenfranchised for so long that they’ve given up hope of ever being revived. Thirdly, they are *Disassembled and Dispersed Bones*. They have been torn asunder as a community. Their families have deteriorated. Their kinship ties are dwindling. Their neighborly ties are diminishing. Instead of being members of the expansive Diaspora they have become remote, distant clusters of disconnected bodies. They are disengaged from each other, from God, from community and the Church. Isolation and separation has become normal and acceptable.

Miraculously, God has sent a hopeful messenger with a healing message. There is Good News. Ezekiel’s message is bi-directional. He speaks to the bones and to the wind. He calls forth the people and the Spirit. God has given Ezekiel something to say because God has given him something to see. As the Church of Jesus Christ, and as proclaimers of the Gospel, the Good News, God is calling us to say something. Based on the experience of the prophet Ezekiel, there are three interrelated ways that the Church can say something.

REVIEW THE SETTING (PASTORAL): Verses 1-3

God places Ezekiel in an unsettling and disconcerting place – a Valley full of bones. The prophet views the setting in the context of one piercing question, “Can these bones live?” In the perspective of the prophet it does not look promising. But through the eyes of faith there is a glimmer of hope. This hope can only be found in the God who placed him in the Valley. The only response that a man of faith can give is “Lord, only you know if new life is possible in this situation!” Dr. Gardner C. Taylor examines the question:

Before that kind of awesome question, with the very breath of God felt upon his spirit, the preacher dare not rush forth babbling bland assurances and mouthing easy answers. The preacher knows that when he or she gazes at the valley of dry bones, something deep within suggests that death is death and that is that, world without end. A quick and easy yes is more than half a lie, for the preacher cannot help having doubts. On the other hand if he or she surrenders to the doubt and says, “No, these bones cannot live,” the preacher impeaches the power of the eternal God. Thus ought there to be some central hush in the preacher’s utterance, for he or she stands in the midst of life-and-death matters, with God very much in the midst of it all.⁷³

Like Ezekiel, we may not be able to see much hope with our naked eyes. The situation looks very bleak when we look at the condition of our African American community. There are gangs and drugs and boarded up houses. Our government is unresponsive. Our schools are failing our children. Our families are barely holding it together. Our financial institutions are crumbling. Our housing stock is eroding. We are forced to face the query, “Can these bones live?” Rather than offer excuses we can offer an exception to the rule. Our ancestors always knew “There’s a bright side somewhere.”

⁷³ Gardner C. Taylor, “*The Foolishness of Preaching*,” *The Lyman Beecher Lecture Series* (1976) at Yale University, in *The Words of Gardner Taylor, Volume 5*, Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2001, 169.

There is hope when God is present. However, we must use spiritual eyes of discernment to see God in the midst of a valley that has been painted by the media and the naysayers who have never spent much time in the Valley. When we look around we can see the potential more than we can see the problem. We can find leaders who will be accountable. We can find people that have defied the odds and have kept their faith and their families together. We can find financial partners who will invest in neighborhoods that hold the key to a renaissance of an entire city. We can find plenty of solid housing properties that can be restored and empty lots that can be rebuilt to form a new village community in the midst of the Valley.

Ezekiel is a prophet with a pastor's heart. He reviews the setting and begins to see what God sees. The people are worth serving in word and deed. They are not to be preached at, but to be preached to. The message is filled with hope in spite of the hell they are currently experiencing. Ezekiel, speak to the bones!

RESPOND TO THE SITUATION (PRIESTLY): Verse 4-8

Ezekiel is sensitized to the plight of the bones while he is placed in the setting of the Valley. Being sensitized leads him to give the proper response to the bones. He does not treat them as means to an end. They are not a statistic. They are not a problem to be solved. They are people with potential. He does not give the pat response as if these bones were the usual suspects. He does not judge the bones by saying, "These bones probably got what they deserved." He does not further stigmatize or marginalize the bones by saying, "These bones belong here in the Valley so they cannot bother those of

us who have made up to the house on the hill.” He does not respond paternalistically by saying, “These bones sure are pitiful and helpless. They would not be able to be anything without me. They need my help in order to fulfill their potential because I am better than them.”

The proper response of one who has been sent to help is to serve the bones as a priestly obligation. As Africans in American, and as members of a community of mutuality, we must respond with mutual respect and love for the people we have been sent to serve. When people are facing death they do not need to be reminded that they are dying. They need a word of hope that defies death. They need someone to tell them that they can defeat death through the power of the Holy Spirit. That is what resurrection is all about. The bones got up because they heard a Word that resisted and transcended their Valley existence. The ministry of encouragement will always bring restoration and regeneration in the face of extinction and annihilation. The ministry of genuine caring persons will cause a renaissance in a valley that has been neglected and abandoned. What looked like a haunting carcass will be miraculously transformed into a vibrant, vigorous and vivacious human being.

RESTATE THE SOLUTION (PROPHETIC): Verses 9-10

Ezekiel’s message and ministry resulted in a miracle. The bones came together and formed the likeness of a reconstructed body. They now looked like they did before their ranks were decimated. But the appearance of cohesion was not enough. There was something invisible that was indispensable to their resurgence. They needed a return to their source – the Spirit of God. This was the source they first encountered in Africa.

Ezekiel must have remembered the ancient story of the Creation from the book of Genesis, adapted from the Egyptian Book of the Dead. The narrative says that the first man had the form of being, but did not become a living soul until God breathed into him the breath of life. Likewise, the Spirit of God and the spirit of ancestors began to inhabit these resurrected bones. The bones not only heard Ezekiel's message they were changed by what they heard. They looked at themselves differently now. They saw a solution and it was within their grasp.

The valleys in our Black neighborhoods will never be changed unless they are confronted. The conditions that create valleys must be confronted and challenged. Prophets must be willing to engage the powers that be. There are forces that must be met head on with the message of social justice. Someone must be willing to speak truth to power at the same time that they preach power to the people. This is the missing component in many of ministries. Many churches are nursing dry bones instead of liberating the bones. The bones might do a lot of rattling, making a lot of noise, and even come together. Our dry bones have been aggregated and assimilated, but they have not been activated. They have "the form of godliness, but are denying the power thereof." We must call on the Spirit to motivate these bones to action. The Spirit can bring the bones together in order to work in synch as "an exceedingly great army." A new legion of soldiers will come to life to rebuild and restore the Valley into a new Promised Land. An army is certainly needed to build the community. Just as the children of Israel had to overcome adversaries and ward off enemies in order to possess the Promised Land, a new generation of potential dwellers of the "land of milk and honey" will have to fight for the future by possessing, protecting and preserving the new Promised Land.

NEW TESTAMENT

Winning the Favor of the City: A New Holy Common Ground – Acts 2:42-47

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.⁷⁴

The Book of Acts is the dramatic beginning of a new alternative community known as the Church. The followers of Jesus Christ were faithful to the directive of their martyred leader and Lord. They assembled in the Upper Room to wait for the arrival of their promise of power. Luke's eyewitness account of the Acts of the Apostles begins with the phenomenal acts of the Holy Spirit. Precipitated by fervent, concerted prayer, the miraculous move of the Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of the hope and prayer of Jesus Christ, if only for a unique moment in time, "Lord make us one."

Their unity is characterized first by the convergence of their diversity. They were assembled together in one place on one accord, itself quite remarkable given the many different ethnic groups represented in that assembly. Upon receiving the outpour of the Holy Spirit they were able to communicate with each other in their own tongues. Peter's sermon, based on the book of the prophet Joel, references the multi-generational and multi-gender promise of God to "pour out His Spirit on all flesh. Sons and daughters will prophesy... your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy." (v. 17-18) The response to his preaching was incredible, around three

⁷⁴ Acts 2:42-47, NIV

thousand souls were converted and became member of this new community. They became the realization of the prophetic proclamation that pointed to a yet-to-be-seen “Beloved Community.”

This text gives a more holistic understanding of a true Pentecostal community. While the so-called charismatic gift of speaking in new tongues toward a divine being gets most of the “miracle mention,” perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this cataclysmic event is the new means of relating to other human beings. There is a spontaneous outbreak of *agape* love. The signs and wonders that accompany the miracle are the passionate practices of continuing in: the apostles’ doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers. These spiritual disciplines are understood in today’s post-modern, post-Pentecostal community as fairly regular practices of devotees. The most extraordinary behavior then follows – they held all things in *common*. “So mightily was the love of God shed abroad in their hearts that they did not look upon their material possessions as their own.”⁷⁵ This is a deliberate statement about the priorities of this new community. New Testament scholar Craig S. Keener says,

The Greek language Luke uses here is language that Pythagoreans and others used the ideal, utopian community. Those who have argued that the early church made a mistake in (these verses) are thus reading their own views into the Bible, not hearing Luke’s message, because Luke portrays this radical lifestyle as the result of the outpouring of the Spirit.⁷⁶

This narrative gives sanguinity to the spiritual pursuit of a new Promised Land. The Holy Spirit gives a new perspective to human relationships and the re-ordering of

⁷⁵ William MacDonald, *The Believers Bible Commentary*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995, 1589.

⁷⁶ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary New Testament*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993, 330.

systems of economic arrangements. The Holy Spirit renews thinking about personal possessions and common wealth. The Holy Spirit reshapes our landscape and reframes our territories into a “Holy Common Ground.”

As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to live out the spiritual disciplines and the radical lifestyles of the first century Christian community. They were counter cultural as a minority movement. This parallels the experience of African Americans who were under threat of persecution, terrorization and extermination. They found strength in the faith of their forbears who had “come this far by faith.” Like the early disciples, they found it necessary to share all things in common in a system of equality and mutual aid and cooperation. The Acts Two Church gives us the paradigm for a “Holy Common Ground.”

REASSESS OUR PRIORITIES

The members of the new Church were remaining steadfast in the apostles’ doctrine. The apostles had been taught a new code of ethics: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul and all your strength...and love your *neighbor* as you love yourself. They had to reassess what was important now. It was no longer about retaliation, retribution and recrimination. Their priorities were now about reconciliation and restoration. They were no longer to be competitive but to be collaborative. We must reassess our priorities in light of the gospel and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As African Americans, we sorely need to reassess our priorities. We have been influenced by American individualism and consumerism. We have adopted me-first attitudes that have adversely affected us and our communities. The Gospel compels us to

love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Self-centeredness is a major threat to community. A key African ideal is summed up in the saying, “I am because we are. And since we are, therefore, I am.” Dr. King would say it this way, “I am not all that I can be until you are all that you can be.” Our values have become warped.

The good news is that the Holy Spirit has the power to reorient our values. Once the Spirit is poured out on all flesh we will begin to see our mutual responsibility for our community. We will begin to envision a new Promised Land that includes all of God’s children. We gain access to God through the Spirit which, in turn, empowers us to change ourselves and the conditions that would imprison and impede us. Our service to one another becomes an extension of our worship of God. As Robert Michael Franklin states,

For black churches, access to God is provided through the Holy Spirit. The spirit realm is conceived as one of freedom. Slaves who were shackled could experience a bit of absolute freedom by abandoning themselves to God’s spirit. Through the careful coordination of visual, audio, olfactory, and tactile stimuli, good worship becomes a form of spiritual therapy in which human wholeness is actualized through communion with God. God is felt and known through worship that engages the senses. Authentic worship is, in Paul Tillich’s terms, a “theonomous” encounter in which participants may relate to God who abhors dichotomies and who reconciles the rational and emotional dimensions of human being, the sacred and the secular, right brain and left, the yin and the yang.⁷⁷

The Beloved Community that Dr. King talked about is related to the New Testament movement precipitated by Pentecost. It also has its roots in the Paradise of Adam and Eve and the Promised Land of Moses of Joshua. We must envision a community with proper and perfecting relationships with God, others, and resources

⁷⁷ Franklin, *Another Day’s Journey*, 31.

(human and material.) Paradise can be “conjured” through the reestablishment of right relationships. Phil Reed describes the principles of Christian Community development in this way:

As we return to God’s perfect plan for his creation in Paradise, we find that not only did Adam and Eve have a relationship with God, but they also had a relationship with each other. The second chapter of Genesis closes with a wedding picture of Adam and Eve standing before God to become “one flesh.” In Matthew 19, Jesus refers to this created order to speak about the sacredness of the marriage bond: “What God has joined together, let man not separate.” (v.6). In Genesis 3, this relationship also became a casualty of the fall. When confronted with his sin, Adam blamed Eve for his failure. The principle for Christian community development is that our efforts have to build up the family unit if we envision our communities as places where we are to experience some of God’s provisions in Paradise.⁷⁸

REALLOCATE OUR POSSESSIONS

The bible says that these new believers had all things in COMMON. The Holy Spirit had changed their perspective about mammon and materials. They began to share with another as a radical community of followers of Christ. They spent their time and their resources on what would benefit the whole, not just individual members of individual families. They were become a family of families, sharing their resources for the health and well-being of all.

In contemporary Western society, there is too much pressure to acquire possessions, protect possessions, maintain possessions, and insure possessions. We need to reinvest in our communities. The money in the African American community does not circulate more than once. We spend our money outside of the very communities that need our money. As we reassess our priorities, we should privilege the objective of lifting the

⁷⁸ Phil Reed, “Toward a Theology of Christian Community Development,” in Perkins, *Restoring At-Risk Communities*, 29.

lot of the least of these. We can only do that by radically redistributing our resources. As Reed points out:

Redistribution means providing opportunities to the poor to obtain the skills and economic resources to be able to work their way out of poverty, whatever the cause for their situation. Redistribution means putting our lives, our skills, our education, and our resources to work to empower the people in a community of need...redistribution is not complete until the community has its own economic base.

On redistribution, we want to make it clear that we are not talking about the seizing of someone's property. Redistribution is not socialism or communism. We are making the case that when God is working in the hearts of his people they will want to use his resources in accordance with his principles. One of the clear principles in Scripture is God's concern for economic development of the poor.⁷⁹

REESTABLISH OUR PARTNERSHIPS

The Acts Two Community witnessed the establishment of new partnerships among this diverse group of people. They "heard each in their own language." This is a signal that God was breaking down barriers between ethnic groups, and class and gender. As mutual beings we are establish relationships and alliances that edify the body and bring the greatest good to the society. The reallocation of resources will require new partnerships. Paternalism is a negative action in social service. We should not help others because we believe that we are better than them and we are the only ones who can help them. True service is motivated by genuine love and respect for others. We give priority to those who need it most. But we also recognize that we are recipients of amazing grace and abundant mercy. Our proper response is to help others and establish new relationships that are mutually edifying. We then become business partners -- in the

⁷⁹ Ibid., 34-35.

business of community building. John Perkins talks about economic development as a necessary aspect of community development,

Economic development then becomes asset management. Asset management finally grows into developing an enterprise that you own. The challenge for Christian community-based economic development, then, is to enable the people of the community to start local enterprises that meet local needs and employ indigenous people.⁸⁰

When you look at Acts Three, immediately following the Acts Two community fellowship, you see the reestablishment of a partnership. Peter and John had competed for the affection and favor of Jesus Christ before his death. They were both a part of Jesus' inner circle. John wants to be "the disciple whom Jesus loved."⁸¹ Peter is the disciple that Jesus sends for upon his resurrection. The disciples were wary of Peter after he denied Jesus at the most critical period of his life. Something changes on the Day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit ushers forth a new family of followers. The leadership exhibits a new model of service based on Jesus' teachings. Peter and John bury their hatchet and re-establish their partnership because they were empowered by the Holy Ghost. They were no longer in competition, but in collaboration. They were no longer jockeying for position, but they were joined in purpose. African Americans have to be committed to building new partnerships between the religious, civic, academic and business communities. We must be committed to partnering across demographic boundaries. The Holy Spirit is clearly the most important agent of revitalization of community. It must not be relegated to the four walls of the church building. It must

⁸⁰ Ibid., 43.

⁸¹ John 21:7, 20.

unleashed into the community to bring the dry bones to life and the rebuilding of the old waste places. Franklin notes,

Perhaps the most remarkable development in black church culture during the post-civil rights era has been its spiritual renewal through the expanding influence of the least familiar forms of black church tradition, namely, Afro-Pentecostal churches and leaders. This is all the more remarkable because this segment of the black church community has not simply been ignored by most church scholars and leaders but has long been a source of scorn and suspicion by mainline American churches and by the assimilated black affluent class. Indeed, during the 1970s and '80s, there were significant denominational culture wars over how contemporary Christians should regard this segment of the church and its claims about the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Riverside Church (former) pastor Dr. James Forbes regarded this skirmish as the American church's opportunity to rediscover and redeem the Third Person of the Trinity in their theologies and liturgical lives.

But today we are in a different place. Nearly all African American churches have tapped into the liturgical energy, joy, power, and excitement of doing ministry that has been especially nurtured in black Pentecostal traditions. In view of the mission crisis I am attempting to address, it may be time for churches at large to give increased attention to underutilized resources that may be able to reverse the mission crisis. In other words, African American Pentecostals have opened the door to spiritual renewal for other black churches and for the Christian church at large. Our mission crisis will be reversed first and foremost by spiritual renewal and revitalization. Beyond that primary commitment and process, there are several additional components of a comprehensive renewal agenda. They include the learning agenda that addresses what clergy need to know as they go forward. There is an ethical agenda that pertains to including female leaders... There is an ecclesiastical reform agenda that includes carefully and critically changing how the church organizes itself to accomplish its mission. This is what Carter G. Woodson addressed with searing clarity and candor. And there is an economic justice agenda that must involve churches exerting their leverage to insist that financial institutions, corporations, and political structures direct capital into ethnic minority communities. I have no doubt that churches will continue to advance the economic justice agenda.⁸²

Peter and John go to the temple with a new sense of urgency. They are going to worship and witness. Ironically, they are met by a lame man at a gate called beautiful. There is a test for the leaders of the new community. They had shared what they had

⁸² Franklin, *Crisis in the Village*, 167-68.

with each other. Now they were challenged by someone outside of their community. The man is relegated to begging for help because of his condition. He cannot work to support himself. All he can do now is ask for a handout. They insisted on setting the terms for a new partnership by telling the man, "Look at us." This was the first time the man was encountered as a full human being rather than a problem. They wanted the *lame* man to be known as a *real* man. His condition did not disqualify him from a membership in a new community. They told the man, "Silver and gold we do not have...." They said this not because they didn't want to share with him as they had just done with others. They said this because they had more than money to give him.

Our communities need more resources, more money, more businesses, better jobs, better housing, and better schools. We have the power to improve our communities. But money alone is not the answer. We need to declare to broken, hurting, lame people, "In the Name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" We no longer see them as people with problems, but people with potential. We can see them as rich resources and abundant assets. John Kretzmann and John McKnight talk about the need for an asset-based model of community development that begins with the assets instead of the deficits of a community.

Each community boasts a unique combination of assets upon which to build its future. A thorough map of those assets would begin with an inventory of the gifts, skills and capacities of the community's residents. Household by household, building by building, block by block, the capacity mapmakers will discover a vast and often surprising array of individual talents and productive skills, few of which are being mobilized for community-building purposes. This basic truth about the "giftedness" of every individual is particularly important to apply to persons who often find themselves marginalized by communities. It is essential to recognize the capacities, for example, of those who have been labeled mentally handicapped or disabled, or of those who are marginalized because they are too old, or too young, or too poor. In a community whose assets are being fully recognized and mobilized, these people too well will be

part of the action, not as clients or recipients of aid, but as full contributors to the community-building process.⁸³

The Black Church has always excelled when it sees more with less. The Black Church has built phenomenal ministries and prodigious edifices on the foundation of hope. Potential is realized when possibilities are pursued. We may not have had much “silver and gold,” but what we have had has been more than enough. The true value of the village is always found in its people.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

The African Church in America

In *The World and Africa*, by W.E.B. DuBois, Theodor Mommsen states:

‘It was through Africa that Christianity became the religion of the world. Tertullian and Cyprian were from Carthage; Arnobius from Sicca Veneria; Lactanius, and probably in like manner Minucius Felix, in spite of their Latin names, were natives of Africa, and not less so, Augustine. In Africa the Church found its most zealous confessors of the faith and its most gifted defenders.’ In addition to Mommsen’s statement, DuBois states, ‘Origen, Athanasius, and Saint Cyril were from the Nile valley. At the head of the Catholic hierarchy at Rome, three popes were African by birth: Victor I (187-198), who defended the Roman date for Easter; Miltiades (311-314), who was pope when the Emperor entered Rome as a Christian; and Gelasius I (492-496), who defended the rights of the papacy against the state.’⁸⁴

The Black Church is a unique, inimitable, and exceptional institution in American life. The roots of the Church run deep from Africa and represent the ferment of the Black freedom movement in the world. As the “Invisible Institution” it manifested a

⁸³ John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets*, Chicago: ACTA Publications, 1993, 6.

⁸⁴ William Jacob Walls, *Reality of the Black Church: The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, Charlotte: A.M.E. Zion Publishing House, 1974. 19.

spirit of affirmation of humanity and resistance to horrific, systemic degradation. In time it became bureaucratic in form and function. However, the driving force of the Church was incontrovertibly spiritual. The Church became a powerful force in opposition against the demonic “principalities and powers” that sought to annihilate Black humanity and dignity. The spiritual identity of the Black Church is the most important element of its character and provides the potential for the recovery of a holistic Africentric ethos that can transform our communities. From its origins the Black Church maintained its cultural integrity. As Henry Mitchell states:

To the average American, it might seem strange to date this book on African American religion from 1619, the year the soon-to-be-enslaved African landed in Jamestown, Virginia. However, the religious faith and practice of the masses of black Americans goes back even earlier than 1619; the continuum starts in Africa. In the words of Bruno Chenu, ‘More than an imposition by the whites, it was the similarity between the Christian religion and their traditional religion that fostered the passage of the faith of the hated master. And African beliefs still lived beneath visible Christianity.’⁸⁵ Of course, this is contrary to the widely circulated assumption that Africans were largely stripped of their native culture and religion during or after their voyage to these shores. The truth is that there is much hard evidence proving that Africans retained a great deal of their original cultural heritage. This is especially true of religion, which was much harder to stamp out than visible behaviors such as styles of manual labor. The long-handled hoe of the colonies may have won out over the back-straining short-handled hoe of Africa, but the tenacity of the communally embraced traditional belief system was far greater. It was the people’s psychic survival kit.⁸⁶

The modern Black Church had to contend with its conflicted cultural identity in America, in what W.E.B. DuBois referred to as the “double-consciousness” of the Black psyche:

⁸⁵ Bruno Chenu, *The Trouble I’ve Seen* (Valley Forge: Judson Press), 2003, 48-49.

⁸⁶ Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long Hidden Realities of the First Years* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 2004, xv.

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁸⁷

The early Black Church helped to militate against this “double-consciousness” and give African Americans an authentic and holistic sense of self-respect, grounded in the biblical and theological reality of divine personhood.

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, one of the first Black denominations, was formed in the crucible of harsh slavery and *de jure* segregation. Worshipping as inferior congregants in predominantly white churches did not sit well with Blacks who knew this contradiction was not biblically or theologically correct. In the heart of one of the emerging metropolises of America, Blacks decided to protest against the religious bigotry they were experiencing in the John Street Methodist Episcopal Church of New York City. They were loyal to the polity and practices of their Methodist identity. However, they chose to establish their own legitimate and authentic expression of the Christian religion.

In 1796, the black Methodists of New York City first met, with the permission and good wishes of Bishop Francis Asbury, who allowed them to ‘hold such meetings in the intervals of the regular preaching hours of the white church.’ Asbury was not always on hand, however, and the white Methodists of the John Street Church later engaged in the same kinds of subterfuge as the whites of St. George’s in Philadelphia to maintain control of black church properties and church life. Notwithstanding delays due to fears because of the Gabriel Prosser revolt in Virginia as well as to internal problems, Zion sprang free with the formation of their own corporation on February 16, 1801, choosing the name of African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. April 8 of the same year

⁸⁷ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Books), 3.

they managed to get title to some land. In 1806, Asbury ordained three deacons, including James Varick, who later became the first A.M.E. Zion bishop.⁸⁸

The A.M.E. Zion Church became known as the “Freedom Church” because of its early embrace of its African identity in its name and its commitment to the abolitionist and freedom struggle. The early adherents and leaders of the Church helped to give the Church its freedom identity: Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Jermain Loguen, and Alexander Walters. As historian David Bradley observes,

The A.M.E. Zion Church not only was foremost in the carrying on of this struggle for freedom but appears to have been the leader along this line. At one time or another every great racial advocate of freedom was a member of this organization. Many of them received their impetus and great encouragement from the membership of the church and this no doubt had tremendous influence on these aggressive leaders.

...When Mother Zion (in New York City) was established, several of her leaders were individuals who owed their freedom to the Methodist Church and naturally that spirit of freedom became a fundamental part of the new organization.

As one turns again to the lives of these Negro (sic) men and women it is not just a matter of chance that they belonged to the A.M.E. Zion Church. Once free, it was well known that this new church of freedom would leave no stone unturned in behalf of the new man. So all along the Mason and Dixon line, and farther west, in Ohio and Indiana, Zion Church men and their friends became beacon points of hope to the escaped slave, and no doubt out of gratitude and faith, they, likewise, became Zion members.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 69.

⁸⁹ David H. Bradley, *A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, (Nashville: The Parthenon Press) 1956, 107-108.

The Anchor of the African American Community: The Black Church

The Black Church has historically held a predominant role for the Black community. It was part social agency, educational institution, mutual aid society, and political advocacy organization. Lewis Baldwin charts this role using famed historian Carter G. Woodson's term, "all-comprehending institution."⁹⁰

In any case, the black church was born into a culture that did not separate private devotion from public duty. Invariably, this meant that the church had to move beyond the strictly *spiritual* and *ecclesiastical* to promote positive change in vital areas of life—social, political, economic, intellectual, and otherwise. This became all the more important for Africans in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, many of whom claimed the church as the only visible institution that they owned and controlled on a wide scale. This is what Carter G. Woodson had in mind when referring to the black church as an 'all-comprehending institution.'

...This politico-prophetic role that these churches would consistently assume in public affairs had become clear by the early 1800s, as they pointed to the paradox of a new nation born in freedom while more than 700,000 Africans languished in bondage. Richard Allen's African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), James Varick's African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ), Peter Spencer's African Union Church, Thomas Paul's African Baptist Church, and other black churches were forced into the public arena by the very nature of the black condition, and their tendency to combine a strong African consciousness and spirituality with an emphasis on racial advancement proved that there were centrifugal forces at work inside them.⁹¹

One of the key roles assumed by the early Black Church, which persisted for many decades, was that of economic empowerment. The Church was the sole institution owned by the African American community, and, as such, wielded a modicum of

⁹⁰ Lewis V. Baldwin, "Revisiting the 'All-Comprehending Institution': Historical Reflections on the Public Roles of Black Churches," in R. Drew Smith, editor, *A New Day Begun: African American Churches and Civic Culture in Post-Civil Rights America*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 2003, 15.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

economic agency for the community. Lincoln and Mamiya talk about this fact in their seminal volume on the Black Church:

The black church is a reflexive institution that moves constantly between the poles of survival and economic arenas. On one hand, for its own economic survival, it is an institution that has taken part in the financial and economic transactions of the larger society and it has largely accepted capitalism as an economic system. On the other hand, the Black Church is the most economically independent institutional sector in the Black community. It does not depend upon white trustees to raise funds, for example, as do most of the Black colleges. Nor does it depend upon White patronage to pay its pastors or erect its buildings.⁹²

Church leaders understood that one of their best weapons against the pernicious effects of racism was harnessing financial power. Baldwin observes:

The pervasiveness of racism led black church leaders to conclude that economic power was perhaps the most significant ingredient in their people's efforts to establish themselves as a force in both their own communities and in the society as a whole. This is why economic values, along with the virtues of education, were highlighted even in the books of doctrine and discipline put forth by African Methodists. In conformity with the Protestant work ethic, black churchpersons were taught to be industrious, to avoid dealing in lotteries, to be prompt in paying debts, to be saving in their means, to deal fairly with one another, and to support each other in business ventures. Such teachings could not have been more important since slavery not only forced scores of African Americans into situations of dependency but also robbed them of the capacity to establish a strong economic base for themselves and their descendants. This sense of being powerless compelled black churches, along with mutual aid societies and Masonic orders, to take the lead in establishing 'an economic ethos for the uplift of the race.'⁹³

The Black Church assumed the primary position of leadership for the Black Community on several counts. The Church had to help provide "shelter in the time of storm" for African American families that were facing the barrage of assaults to their being and determination to be free. This can be referred to as the "refuge" function of the

⁹² C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press), 1990, 241.

⁹³ Baldwin, 21.

“invisible institution.” The Church also had to serve as the agent and advocate for Black abolition and autonomy. This can be referred to as the “liberation” function of the Church. The Church also had to serve as the instrument of social advancement and economic viability. This can be referred to as the “uplift” or “elevation” function of the church. As Wilmore states:

The primary impulse behind these Northern (church) developments was a desire not so much for survival—that had already been secured to a large degree for those no longer in bondage—but for autonomy, racial solidarity, self-help, and individual and group elevation. Thus Peter Spencer formed a new denomination, the Union Church of African Members, in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1818; Richard Allen became the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in Philadelphia in 1816; and James Varick became the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, founded in New York City in 1821. These men, together with Absalom Jones, rector of St. Thomas Episcopal Church of Africans in Philadelphia; John Gloucester, pastor of the First African Presbyterian Church of the same city; Peter Williams, Jr., the first ordained black priest of the Episcopal Church in New York; and Thomas Paul, the founder of the first black Baptist Church, also in New York City, were all strong, progressive leaders who, in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, promoted education and social betterment as a religious obligation. They encouraged northern lay people to undertake racial-advancement programs and activities at a time when public meetings of blacks were forbidden in the South and even preaching was prohibited except under white supervision.⁹⁴

The Black Church was firmly established as the one institution that had a direct connection to the daily experiences of African American communities that were seeking to anchor themselves in the new “Promised Land” of the North. Many parishioners had migrated to the North with a religious sensibility infused with an objective of social mobility. They had seen the Church as the host and sponsor of educational programs, communal gatherings, civic organizations and fraternal associations. Black elementary schools were hosted in churches. Black colleges were founded by and in Black

⁹⁴ Wilmore, *Pragmatic Spirituality*, 52-3.

Churches. Respected organizations such as the NAACP and Urban League met in the fellowship halls of churches. This all helped to shape an institutional mindset that was germane to religious life. However, it did not erase the systemic racism that was manifested in de facto segregation, which solidified and reified classism. It became increasingly difficult to discern and advance the tripartite mission of survival, elevation and liberation. Some restructuring needed to occur to facilitate the shifts occurring in Black economic life. As Wilmore states:

Between the First and Second World Wars it was necessary to realign the survival, elevation, and liberation themes so as to create the kind of balance and harmony between them that would be conducive to racial advancement. It was the experience of African American leadership during the era of abolitionism and missionary emigrationism that when one of these themes or tendencies is either neglected or exaggerated above the other two, the result is that commitment to the biblical God and to a militant church, on the one hand, and to African American political, economic, and cultural life, on the other, fall apart. The center collapses, and chaos reigns. This happened during the Radical Reconstruction and again during the Great Depression of the 1930s. On both occasions the consequence was a kind of racial schizophrenia that left the masses in moral confusion and the middle classes in a spiritual malaise that rendered them powerless to give the kind of leadership necessary for realignment and a new beginning as soon as relative calm and prosperity returned.⁹⁵

The Modern Civil Rights Movement became the ferment necessary to awaken the African American consciousness for the need to galvanize its base and resources in order to build the new Promised Land. The 1954 Brown versus Board of Education Supreme Court decision became the precursor to the deconstruction of institutional and systemic barriers to racial equality. This helped to give impetus to Montgomery Bus Boycott and the legal removal of racial segregation in public accommodations. This, in turn, gave the

⁹⁵ Ibid., 55-6.

Black Church the springboard for a return its radical and practical roots of racial advancement. Wilmore goes on to say:

Beginning in 1955 the genius of Martin Luther King, Jr. brought the three motifs or traditions (survival, elevation and liberation) together again in a prophetic combination that wedded the deep spirituality and will to survive of the alienated and impoverished masses with the sophisticated pragmatism and determination to achieve equality and complete liberation that characterized the parvenu urbanites and the “New Negro” intelligentsia of the Harlem Renaissance. King embraced all three of these tendencies and created a multidimensional movement, inseparable from the African American church but not subservient to it. As a young Baptist preacher he set in motion social, political, economic, religious, and cultural forces that have not yet run their full course. Martin Luther King Jr. stands, therefore, at the pinnacle of African American religious and political developments in the twentieth century.⁹⁶

The Civil Rights Movement laid the foundation for a new Black Church. A heightened level of Black consciousness and infused with an Africentric pride was related to a new sense of responsibility to the African American community. The assassination of King in 1968 precipitated Black angst and rage that led to riots and white flight. However, Black Churches had already begun to resume the role of facilitator of social and economic progress. Urban metropolises such as Baltimore saw a resurgence of Black religious leadership. Marion Orr observes:

In the 1950s and 1960s, when the national civil rights movement began in earnest, Baltimore had already established a foundation for an independent African-American protest movement. Black Baltimoreans had ‘leaders who had been toughened rather than demoralized by degradation. They had the *Afro-American*, probably the strongest black newspaper in the United States... They had strong churches under politically minded ministers, and they had some aggressive female leaders like Lillie May Jackson and her daughters. Led largely by prominent black middle-class professionals, they accomplished some impressive victories: concessions from private employers for jobs, equalization of pay for black school teachers, significant increases in black voter registration, and the hiring of black police officers.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁹⁷ Marion Orr, *Black Social Capital: The Politics of School Reform in Baltimore, 1986-1998*, Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1999, 35.

The aftermath of the riots and the devolution of the Civil Rights movement left Baltimore's Black clergy and other leaders with a quandary in terms of community survival. The invasion-succession of former Jewish communities was plowing toward an inevitable fulfillment. The Palm Sunday weekend of 1968 devastated the city. As Antero Pietila recounts:

Baltimore emerged from three nights of mayhem during that Palm Sunday weekend with six persons dead, seven hundred injured, more than a thousand business ransacked and destroyed, countless houses torched, and more than five thousand people arrested. The National Guard and regular army troops patrolled downtown. Looters wiped out commercial corridors in nine neighborhoods. Pillaging was indiscriminate. Stores were looted without regard to whether their owners were white or black. A substantial number belonged to Jews, including several who had blue numbers inked on their arms, irremovable reminders of their narrow escape from the Final Solution.

Anguish gripped America's devastated cities. To prevent a race war, Congress enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1968, including provisions for fair housing. Few thought that such a measure had a chance when President Johnson had proposed it two years earlier. But with big cities in flames, the House passed the act by a vote of 250 to 172, and the Senate by 71 to 20. Eight days after Dr. King's assassination, President Johnson signed it into law. He engineered the passage so swiftly that Coretta King and many other civil rights leaders were missing from the crowd of 350 guests who witnessed the bill's signing at the hastily arranged East Room ceremony. The White House could not locate them at the time, and the signing could not be delayed. "Fair housing for all—all human beings who live in this country—is now part of the American way of life," President Johnson proclaimed.⁹⁸

In 1970s, many Black Churches had to reevaluate their strategies of services to African American families and communities, especially as government sponsored urban renewal programs pumped resources into city domains. History was about to be rewritten in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement. Some churches retreated into self-preservation or fled to the suburbia, while others began to transform their ministries into community-centered hubs. Harold McDougall cites,

⁹⁸ Antero Pietila, *Not in My Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped a Great American City*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publishers, 2010, 196.

African-American churches and fraternal organizations responded to urban renewal and the costs it imposed on neighborhoods and low-income residents by transforming themselves into aggressive community improvement organizations...Community protests centered on the city's housing and urban renewal programs. They fought planning that was undertaken for business rather than for people; they called for rent control and for community management of government services and government-subsidized housing. Social activists, including clergy, turned to the creation of parallel institutions at the neighborhood level to try to repair some of the damage that had been done to the vernacular community by overcrowding, state repression, and the loss of middle-class residents.⁹⁹

Black churches that began to mobilize community-centered ministries merged their historical roles of "all-comprehending" institutions with contemporary genres of church-based organizing, like that promoted by legendary leader Saul Alinsky, and church-based community development, like that promoted by Rev. John Perkins. Both of them were influenced by the Civil Rights movement's grass-roots character and religious spirit. Both of them concluded that government programs were inadequate. Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) helped to organize BUILD (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development), a coalition of churches established by IAF in the early 1980s committed to community empowerment. Although IAF is not an African American organization *per se*, it found its greatest early successes in Black communities. The Black Church had the primary role in organizing these neighborhoods. McDougall states:

⁹⁹ McDougall, 98-106.

The IAF has adopted the position that the church is the primary mediating institution in the black community. Unions, schools, and ethnic clubs, all of which surfaced in the black communities like Old West Baltimore, are now on the decline. The church is the last link with the vernacular community, but even in the black church there are strong counter-pressures. A process of divestment is going on, Reverend Dobson (former pastor of Union Baptist Church) observed. "First the white congregations divested and moved to the suburbs, leaving behind some very fine buildings that black congregations took over. But now the black congregations want to move to the suburbs, too. The ministers are trying to invest in the community, to make it difficult for the congregation to leave. They believe that spiritual growth takes place in the 'community of need,' with all its pain and danger, rather in a withdrawn, pristine, monastic sort of spiritual experience way out in the suburbs."

BUILD tries to impress a twofold message upon the ministers it recruits into the organization: not only will people grow and develop as they address the citywide issues that are on the larger organization's agenda, but leadership must also be trained to deal with the issues of concern to the congregation and the local community. At present, however, the churches with significant resources are middle-class, and many have little contact with marginal people. Their parishioners travel from the suburbs to worship in inner-city churches. A positive sign is that these churches tend to remain located in the black community; while they are not "of" the community, at least they are "in" it, and can sometimes be prevailed upon to reach out to the marginalized community that surrounds the church itself.¹⁰⁰

BUILD found a great deal of success primarily because of its emphasis upon galvanizing and mobilizing "community." This squares directly with the core identity of the African American community and the Black Church. IAF helped the Black Church, in a sense, return to its African-centered roots. Cadres of church members were equipped to do social and political analyses of the state of inner-city communities. They were then empowered to do "actions" on politicians, landlords and business owners that were violating an ethic of community accountability. BUILD gained headway in a few city neighborhoods. However, many of the neighborhoods that saw a resurgence in the 1980s in the BUILD movement and in the administration of the first Black mayor, Kurt Schmoke, have once again experience great disinvestment and decay.

¹⁰⁰ McDougall, 133-34.

A disciple of the civil rights movement in the South was Reverend John Perkins. Perkins embraced and espoused the concept of King's "Beloved Community," promoting it as a possible reality in poor communities across America. A young leader in Mississippi the 1960s, Perkins was dramatically influenced by the work of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE). However, he believed that these organizations were not as committed to King's vision of true racial cooperation and grass roots empowerment. He saw a new vision of community. Charles Marsh writes,

Perkins charted a new course for building beloved community in America—one that defied conventional political categories. Leadership must be based in poor communities and eventually rise out of these communities, but at the same time outsiders would be invited to play a critical role in fostering indigenous leadership. In Perkins' view, civil rights organizations such as SNCC and CORE too often racialized and politicized the role of the outsider at the expense of the well-being of people in poor communities. Patronization is a worry only when outsiders fail to discern the gifts of the poor, their loyalty, fragility, creativity, and holiness, and to accept the authority of black leadership—that is, when outsiders fail to appreciate the diverse gifts of the body of Christ and the mutuality ingredient in redemptive community. Without backing away from his support of integration, equal opportunity, affirmative action, and welfare—but recognizing their incompleteness—Perkins further concluded that government programs alone failed to address the deeper sources of hopelessness in black communities... The civil rights movement had focused its energies on legal injustice—as the times required—but it failed to offer a compelling account of the spiritual energies and disciplines required to sustain beloved community and thus failed to give detail and depth to a "wholistic Gospel." The civil rights movement failed to reckon with the truth that personal salvation is the most enduring source of social engagement, care for the poor, costly forgiveness, and reparations for slavery.¹⁰¹

Perkins went on to lead a movement that was grassroots, indigenous and neighborhood based. Starting with local community development organizations, he began to coalesce

¹⁰¹ Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, From the Civil Rights Movement to Today*, New York: Basic Books, 2005, 176-77.

with leaders in other cities that had adopted his conceptual framework for community transformation. Marsh describes the impact of Perkins and the organization:

In 1989 he (Perkins) formed the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA), the organizational infrastructure of the faith-based community-building movement. In its first year, the CCDA comprised 200 individuals and 37 organizational members. At a recent CCDA conference, Perkins announced organizations with sites in more than 100 cities, including Bethel New Life, a comprehensive community development initiative in Chicago, and Habitat for Humanity... Annual meetings of the Christian Community Development Association resemble a mix of mass meeting, Billy Graham crusade, and SNCC planning session circa 1963. Between worship services, prayer meetings and Gospel songs are seminars on community organizing; tutorials on writing applications for public sector grants; support groups for partnering with corporations and affluent churches; and nuts-and-bolts instruction on starting public health centers, running after-school tutorial programs, transforming crack houses into "Kingdom houses," and managing volunteers and prison aftercare. Perkins has extended SCLC's model of community mobilizing and SNCC's preference for community organizing to a distinctive theological vision of community building—activism mindful of the three Rs of relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution, the ingredients of wholistic faith.¹⁰²

Perkins gospel had reached the city of Baltimore by 1986 when Mark Gornik, a young Presbyterian minister and his best friend Allan Tibbles moved into a row house in the Baltimore neighborhood of Sandtown-Winchester.¹⁰³ "As white Christians, we believed it was vital that we turn from our complicity in a culture that is anti-black, anti-poor and anti-urban and turn to the biblical obligations of justice and reconciliation. We came to listen, to learn, to build friendships, and to live out our faith. When people would ask us, 'What are you doing here?' our answer was always the same: 'We are here to be neighbors.'¹⁰⁴ After training with Perkins organization, Gornik and Tibbles were took

¹⁰² Ibid., 184-5.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 190.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 190.

steps to establish a church-based community development enterprise that included housing, church and school. Marsh describes their evolution,

In time, Gornik's row house on Mount Street and Tibbel's on Stricker became the two bases of a twelve-block "focus area" called New Song Community. With strong neighborhood leadership and financial support from Baltimore churches and philanthropic organizations, a slate of holistic programs was created under the auspices of New Song Community Ministries: a health center, job-placement program, private Christian school, legal cooperative, youth services cooperative, community church, and a Habitat for Humanity project, which Jimmy Carter launched himself on a festive spring day in 1992. Establishing the church was a decisive step in anchoring the ministry in the community, since many of the community-building initiatives that survive the first blush of excitement are based in common worship. All these commitments have formed the context within which Gornik thinks theologically.¹⁰⁵

New Song Community and the Christian Community Development Corporation have the ingredients of an Africentric praxis model for community empowerment. They have recaptured a radical zeal akin to the Black churches of the mid-twentieth century that provided a range of social services for African Americans while working arduously against the sting of white racism and economic injustice. Most of the principles of the Nguzu Saba are apparent in the goals and objectives of CCDA. Such an intersection between the truly grassroots Christian aims and Africentric principles of community make for a powerful foundation for community transformation.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 195.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

The Substance of Things Hoped For

Restoring the historic, integral connection of the Black Church and the African American community is both a theological and missional goal. The proponents of Black Theology would argue that they are one in the same. At its heart, Black Theology is practical, and its ultimate aim is liberation of the oppressed. The subjects and objects of liberation are people who live in communities that have been marginalized by racial, political and economic injustice. This has been the historical role of the Black Church, which is located almost exclusively in predominantly African American communities. However, that role has been diminished by the continuing confluence of religious and social assimilation in post-Civil Rights American society, and institutional self-preservation and apathy in the Black Church. Many Black Churches have fallen short in their commitment to liberation and social change.

Black Theology was forged in the crucible of the Civil Rights Movement of the 50's and 60's and really emerged in the aftermath of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. It rode the wave of the Black Church's principal role in the movement while also finding voice in the Black Power movement's critique of reticent and non-concerned Black Churches. This highlighted a growing disconnect – theologically and practically – between the academy of Black theologians and grassroots Black Churches, between the interpretation of Black faith and the actual practice of ministry. Black theologians were espousing a political agenda that took the power structures to task, including, and especially, the Church. Dale Andrews notes:

In a short period of time, the rhetoric of this political agenda echoed at the center of an emerging chasm between the black theology project and black

churches. A principal disparity emerged between their respective theological interpretations of faith and ministry. On the one hand, the black theology project regarded black churches as spiritually removed or “otherworldly.” In July of 1966, for example, the newly organized National Committee of Negro Churchmen issued a statement on black power: ‘Too often the Negro Church has stirred (*sic*) its members away from the reign of God in *this world* to a distorted and complacent view of *an otherworldly* conception of God’s power.’ With such claims, proponents of black theology addressed the message of the Black Power Movement to black churches. Black theologians charged that black churches had abandoned their liberation history for an ineffectual spirituality, and therefore failed to confront adequately the concerns of black people living under racial and economic oppression.¹⁰⁶

The truth is that Black Theology would not exist without the Black Church. As a product of the mission of the Black Church, a unique pastoral theology emerged to enable the dual roles of survival and liberation for African American people. Carroll Watkins-Ali describes both as necessary functions of pastoral theology in the Black Church.

Survival is the ability of African Americans (1) to resist systematic oppression and genocide and (2) to recover the self, which entails a psychological recovery from the abuse and dehumanization of political oppression and exploitation as well as recovery of African heritage, culture and values that were repressed during slavery. By *liberation*, I mean (1) total freedom from all kinds of oppression for African descendants of slaves and (2) the ability of African Americans as a people to self-determine and engage in the process of transformation of the dominant oppressive culture through political resistance.¹⁰⁷

Watkins-Ali argues for a Black pastoral theology that is defined as “theological reflection on the experience of the cultural context as relevant for strategic pastoral caregiving in the context of ministry...It suggests that pastoral theological reflection is at least a two-

¹⁰⁶ Dale Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 2002, p. 3-4.

¹⁰⁷ Carroll A. Watkins-Ali, *Survival and Liberation: Pastoral Theology in African American Context*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press), 1999, 2.

step process that puts the experience of the people inhabiting the context for ministry ahead of the experience of the pastoral caregiver in the ministry context.”¹⁰⁸

The current context of ministry for African Americans has been described by Watkins-Ali as “genocidal poverty,” it is “the kind of living conditions that are responsible for the growing death rate in the Black community. Although poverty is not normally listed as a cause of death, the malnutrition, fetal demise, untreated disease (due to lack of or poor health care), homicide, fratricide, suicide and alcohol and drug abuse that are becoming prevalent in poor Black communities all contribute to the gradual form of genocide that has been integral to the systematic racial oppression of Blacks.”¹⁰⁹ The Black Church, especially in urban areas, must begin to work towards alleviating and eradicating this persistent condition. It will require a recovery of an African-centered theology that is practical and intentional. This cannot happen without progressive and responsible leadership, especially from theologian/practitioners. James A. Harris highlights the ambiguity of the Black pastor as theologian.

Pastoral theology is liberation theology because it is grounded in praxis. Its focus is comprehensive and specific. It deals with developing and implementing policies and programs in the church and community that convey the meaning of Christianity in practical life situations. It is the understanding of God and the world that governs the life and work of the pastor and parishioners. Being a pastor is a calling! It requires an inordinate amount of love and sacrifice because the work of the pastor is often thankless and extremely demanding. It is also a constant struggle that involves motivation, change, continuity, teaching, preaching, counseling, managing, and a host of other skills, emotions, and activities. The pastor is both admired and hated, trusted and distrusted, supported and repudiated. The pastor is both prophet and politician—balancing life and work between theory and practice. He or she must have a vision of ministry and a plan for accomplishing that vision through the people who constitute the church and community...

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 10-11.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 25.

The black church is not exempt from...criticism because there is a tendency among clergy and laity to be superficial and flamboyant. Few black ministers on radio and television are preaching liberation messages, urging the church to be an active agent of social change, opposing morally wrong and insensitive policies of government and industry. If every black preacher in America decided to confront seriously the status quo through sermons and programs that advocated protest against our cavalier treatment of the poor, we could begin the process of transforming the condition of life for the oppressed of society. This radical approach to ministry would enable the church to reclaim its heritage as an institution that has been on the cutting edge of social change.¹¹⁰

Harris goes on to talk about the mutual interdependence of the Church and the community, saying “the economic survivability of the church and the community is grounded in a mutual understanding of the need to help each other advance beyond their present status.”¹¹¹ As has been stated, and bears repeating, one cannot understand the Black Church without placing it within the context of the African American community, with its values of self-worth, mutual care and shared responsibility. Dale Andrews draws on the work of Pastoral Theologian Ed Wimberly and his concept of “narrative hermeneutics.”¹¹²

...The worldview of the community, which includes spiritual values, operates as an interpretive guide in a narrative process. Because of the narrative character, African American pastoral care for the individual thrives in community. The hermeneutical process for personal wholeness is a communal process of mutual storytelling. This reflexive process includes interpretation and reinterpretation between individual experiences and those experiences common to the culture or faith community itself. Because of the respect for personal experience, the communal hermeneutic does allow for new encounters and new interpretations of meaning. The community of faith is therefore expanded by the introduction of new experiences. What I find particularly vital here is the evolving character of corporate care. Corporate care is mutual care only so long as it is not stagnant. Instead, it thrives in a dynamic interplay

¹¹⁰ James A. Harris, *Pastoral Theology: A Black Church Perspective*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press) 1991, ix, 16.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 37.

¹¹² Andrews, 25.

between traditional narratives, narratives of the local community, and individual narratives or experiences.¹¹³

In the “communal hermeneutic,” Wimberly is describing an organic, fundamental practice of religious formation that happens in faith communities. This practice is not usually formal or academic.

Gayraud Wilmore observes a “second level of understanding” of Black Theology that has “no interest in developing a polemical response to the Euro-American synthesis of Christian truth in the context of Euro-American experience but has another purpose instead. At this level we are not concerned about the ontological and soteriological meaning of blackness but rather about recovering the simple truth about God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit which African American Christians have taken for granted in relation to themselves from slavery to the present day.”¹¹⁴ This is more a “folk theology” or a religion of the people. This is a crucial concept because it provides a space for the establishment of a “common ground” for conversation and collaboration between the church and the community.

The Black Church has functioned somewhat like what Walter Bruggeman described as an “alternative community.”¹¹⁵ This alternative community has been characterized by prophetic ministry. “The task of prophetic ministry,” according to Bruggeman, “is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative

¹¹³ Ibid., 25.

¹¹⁴ Wilmore, *Pragmatic Spirituality*, 159.

¹¹⁵ Walter Bruggeman, *The Prophetic Imagination (Second Edition)*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001, 3.

to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”¹¹⁶ An Africentric spirituality recovers a cultural ethos that counters the effects of racism, classism and oppression. Bruggeman goes on to say,

The alternative consciousness to be nurtured, on the one hand, serves to *criticize* in dismantling the dominant consciousness. To that extent, it attempts to do what the liberal tendency has done: engage in a rejection and delegitimizing of the present ordering of things. On the other hand, that alternative consciousness to be nurtured serves to *energize* persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move. To that extent, it attempts to do what the conservative tendency has done, to live in fervent anticipation of the newness that God has promised and will surely give.¹¹⁷

Although Black Theology is a primary source of information and inspiration for prophetic ministry, it is not without valid criticism, especially from a truly Afrocentric perspective. Much of Black Theology, at least its categories of description, has been drawn from Eurocentric concepts of theological inquiry which in themselves have been deleterious to Black fulfillment and self-determination. Andrews describes this challenge,

Readdressing black theology to black churches therefore requires a redirection in black theology’s experiences of Christianity as well as the human encounter with oppression in black life. This redirection obliges black theology to interpret theological concepts that presently exist in black churches. In the process of interpretation, black theologians must not dismiss the churches’ own conceptualizations or theological criteria.¹¹⁸

Many theologians have countered Black Theology’s assumptions of inherent relevance to the African American community by pointing out the lack of an Africentric focus. Cecil Cone contends that the starting point for Black Theology should be Black folk religion, which has its roots in African culture. Failure to start there leads to an

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 3.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹¹⁸ Andrews, 50.

identity confusion for Black theology.¹¹⁹ Andrews picks up on this point: “This critique insists that black theologians reconceptualize their treatment of liberation from within black folk religion. Such an effort might provide a more critical tool for the very faithfulness to social action among black churches that black theology aspires to advance.”¹²⁰

The Black Church has been impacted, as has the African American community en masse, by American individualism. Many Black theologians have vehemently articulated this truth. A few have addressed this dilemma through a theological conceptualization of a return “home.” This home is at once spiritual, cultural and physical. The perceived separation between the Black Church and the African American community has left both entities as “aliens” in a strange land. Butler states,

We have the very important task of ending the separation of church and community. If we are going to be healthy, whole, and holy, it is imperative that we mend this breach between church and community and reclaim our legacy of African American spirituality. The reintroduction of the split-off personality into the whole will allow us to embrace church and community as a single liberating and salvific force for African America. It will provide us with a complete sense of self and lead us home...The liberation of our people is dependent upon the reunification of church and community.¹²¹

Homer Ashby, Jr. continues the theme by “conjuring” a new Promised Land for the African American community that is led by the “Joshua Church,” which actualizes African-American identified ministries of survival and liberation. This includes a

¹¹⁹ Cecil Cone, *Identity Crisis*, 18.

¹²⁰ Andrews, 51.

¹²¹ Butler, 68.

recovery of self, freedom from all kinds of oppression and the ability to self-determine.¹²²

The Promised Land for African Americans is just as it was for Joshua and the children of Israel – a return home.

The Promised Land for blacks today needs to be found in an internal consciousness. This internal consciousness is characterized by an increased sensitivity to the threat of extinction, the restoration of a sense of collective identity, engagement in an ongoing struggle beyond mere survival, and partnership with God in whom the will and the guarantee of the promise are located.¹²³

The Promised Land for blacks in the twenty-first century is a place that exists within the larger American society and its culture but at the same time maintains a separate existence. This separate existence is more attitudinal than spatial. The Promised Land is an attitude, a way of being, a responsive resistance, but yet an a priori declaration of what it means to be black in America. Such a promised land is rooted in the promise, will, and guarantee of God. The promise is that African Americans as a people can live a life with full humanity, that God will supply that power and the will for black people to struggle in this conquest, and that the victory of full humanity is guaranteed even in the face of a hostile, death-dealing environment.¹²⁴

The recovery of an Africentric identity and ethic for ministry is a journey home. This journey will require a fight for freedom - liberation. The liberation motif is an indispensable aspect of the Black Church's struggle to rebuild community. Because of the pervasive nature of racial injustice, liberation is a necessary partner to the survival aspect of ministry in African American communities. Dennis Proctor, A.M.E. Zion Bishop and former pastor of Pennsylvania Avenue Church, lists four important points of the liberation motif:

1. A liberation motif that is affirming would benefit the religious and non-religious persons in the Afro-American community helping to

¹²² Homer U. Ashby, Jr., *Our Home is Over Jordan: A Black Pastoral Theology*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003, 37.

¹²³ Ibid., 27.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 31.

- create a climate of cooperation and inter-dependence to combat the nihilistic threat.
2. Polity and theology aside, African Americans share biogenetic commonality and history of oppression and repression that necessitate common survival mechanisms and doctrinal development.
 3. The community of faith, be it Christian, Muslim, African, Traditional or other, share the same heroes and heroines of the struggle.
 4. The rise of independent African churches in America was not the result of theological or ecclesiastical differences but racial prejudice and discrimination.¹²⁵

The twenty-first century Black Church should recognize that our current social location is not a matter of theology but sociology, precipitated by racial and social injustice. The resurgence of the prophetic Black Church of the past will be initiated and activated by a recovery of the African spirituality that shaped the original Black Church in America. Peter Paris identifies six moral virtues of African and African American churches that promote community and appear to be preeminent in both. They are namely: 1. Beneficence: The beneficent person is a person of good will, one who joyfully extends hospitality to all alike, respecting all persons. 2. Forbearance: This is a patient tolerance to do what is necessary to preserve life under caustic conditions. 3. Practical Wisdom: “This is an excellence of that thought that guides good action.” “It is the fully developed capacity of a free moral agent for making reasonable judgments about the best means for the attainment of penultimate goals as well as the determination of their commensurability with the ultimate goal of the good life.” 4. Improvisation: This brings novelty to bear on the familiar, not for the sake of destroying the latter, but for the purpose of heightening the individuality and uniqueness of the agent and his or her

¹²⁵ Dennis Proctor, *A Strategy for Recovering the Liberation Motif of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (Unpublished D.Min. Thesis, United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio) 1993, 10-11.

creative ability. 5. Forgiveness: This rebukes the toll that hatred can exact by cultivating the habitual exercise of kindness for the sake of the community. 6. Justice: This is realized in two ways – the individual’s obligations to the community as mediated through the many dealing individuals have with one another and the community’s obligations to its members and itself.¹²⁶

An African centered spirituality is best suited to the Black Church’s goals of reconciling and restoring the African American community. The moral virtues of the culture and adapted principles of Nguzo Saba are the effectual ingredients of a redeemed and revitalized neighborhood. Considering the fact that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the product of the Black Church and the African American community, it is no wonder that his vision of a Beloved Community incorporated, implicitly and explicitly, much of these same characteristics. This indeed provides the foundation for the building of a “holy common ground.”

¹²⁶ Paris, 136-153.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

The African American community has long relied on the Black Church as an agent and advocate of stability within a hostile society. Currently, however, there appears to be a lack of a concrete strategy of action on behalf of the church because of a perceived lack of information, interest and involvement. Some have concluded that there is a growing schism between the faith community and the wider Black community. The Black Church can be accused of a “benign neglect” of the very communities in which most of them were birthed and belong. A key for renaissance can be found in a recovery of an Africentric communal ethos. The goal of this research has been to seek to re-establish a partnership to revitalize and mobilize the church and the community by: sharing our common story, as an African-centered ethic, through the narratives of the residents and congregants; building consensus around our common goals (African “communalism”); and building common wealth (the African/Kwanzaa principle of Ujamaa) by sharing, developing and increasing our common assets. Much of the resources and strategies of pastoral care have been utilized in seeking to bridge and heal the emerging rupture between the Black Church and the African American community. Utilizing the methods of liberation theology and Christian community development, a praxis model has been developed to engage the church in liberating conversations that will lead to reconciliation and restoration. The foundation of this dialogue has been a spiritually grounded, African-centered worldview of the global community through the lens of the village community, which is to be valued, celebrated, protected and promoted.

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to develop a practical method of cooperation and collaboration between a Black Church (Pennsylvania Avenue A.M.E. Zion Church) and its surrounding African American community (Upton/Baltimore) in order to improve the socio-economic conditions of the community. This research employed a qualitative approach to designing a relevant, Africentric praxis model for educating and empowering congregants to do organic, grass roots community development. The research methodology included: (1) a review of the literature of Black liberation theology and faith-based community development, including theory and practical examples; (2) an analysis of the community in which the church functions based on experiential and documented data; (3) a selection of a focus group of five persons made up of a combination of Church members who currently reside in the Upton neighborhood and Church members who previously resided in the neighborhood; (4) a pre-test assessment through interviews and a survey of the group's perspective of the condition of the community and the church's role in addressing the condition in four key areas: Housing, Education, Poverty and Employment; (5) A five-part preaching series entitled "Standing on Holy Common Ground" addressing the Church's prophetic call to community service and empowerment; (6) A five-part series of biblically-based teaching and workshop discussions about social and economic justice from an Africentric perspective that addresses the aforementioned areas. The researcher wrote reflection papers from each section describing the lessons and responses of the participants. Focus group members kept journals of reflections and learning from the discussions; (7) the researcher conducted reflection, discussion and strategy sessions with pastor-colleagues in the Upton neighborhood; (8) a post-test comprised of the original survey questions to

ascertain changes in opinions and perspectives about the key issues; and (9) the results of the information ascertained from the previous steps will lead to the development of a curriculum for community development to be presented to the Church leadership and the congregation.

Project Timeline

The study began with an introduction through a preaching series entitled, “Standing on Holy Common Ground.” The series was focused on bridging the perceived divide between the Black Church and the African American community through responsible prophetic action. A group of members who either lived in the surrounding community or previously lived in the surrounding community were recruited to be a part of a project focus group. The group began by completing a pre-test of twenty questions about the perceptions of the church’s role in the community. There were six sessions held. The group concluded by initiating a new board of directors for the Church’s Community Development Corporation and committing to enacting a strategic plan of action for the community.

March 6 – April 17 – Preaching series “Standing on Holy Common Ground”

June 11 – Focus Group Session – Introduction, “Our Mandate”

June 18 – Focus Group Session – “Our Mission”

July 12 – Focus Group Session – “Our Ministry”

July 19 – Focus Group Session – “Our Mindset”

September 22 – Focus Group Session – “Our Mutuality,” Conclusion

Analysis of the Data

September 26 – The Focus Group met to discuss the analysis of the data.

Supportive Research Process

During this process, the researcher examined the materials that support the presupposition that the church can engage its members in transformative community development through relevant education and experience. The researcher will share his conclusion with other authorities in the field.

Saturday, September 28, 2011

- Analysis is completed

Writing of the First Draft of the Document

The writing of the first draft compiled all data with the creation of a study guide, *Standing on Holy Ground: A Praxis Model for Church-Based Community Empowerment and Development*

Saturday, October 1, 2011

- Completion of the manual.

Completion of the Final Project

The necessary revisions will be completed with the input of professional associates, peer associates, and authorities in the field of church-based community development.

Monday, October 3, 2011

- Completion of input

CHAPTER FIVE

FIELD EXPERIENCE

This study was conducted in the context of the Pennsylvania Avenue A.M.E. Zion Church of Baltimore, Maryland. A focus group of five persons committed to working with the researcher through a ten week process that included listening to five sermons, and conducting five bible study and discussion sessions. The subject of the sermon series and the discussions was “Standing on Holy Common Ground: Bridging the Gap between the Black Church and African American Community.” The focus group consisted of congregants who were current or former residents of the Upton Community, in which the church is located. There was one male and four females. They ranged in age from 38-81 years of age. Four of them are employed. One is retired. All of them have been involved in neighborhood associations, programs and activities in both the community and the church. One of them is the director of the Upton Planning Committee, recognized by the city of Baltimore as the main neighborhood association. One of them works in the city’s new major program, “Vacants to Values,” focused on eliminating neighborhood blight and reducing the numbers of vacant properties in the city by selling them at dramatically reduced prices. Two of them were former drug addicts who have recovered, turned their lives around and have become productive members of the Church and the community. One of them has been a member of the Zion Church for 69 years and has worked on

neighborhood councils and community associations since 1958. The group met between June 11th and July 19th, and had one final session on October 1st.

Each member of the focus group participated in the study in several ways. They attended Church for most of the Sundays of the sermon series, entitled “Standing on Holy Common Ground.” The sermon series was a challenge to the congregation to live out its mission to the world by focusing on the issues, challenges and concerns of the African American community, especially as it pertains to our immediate neighborhood. The group was asked to keep notes of thoughts and reflections from the series. Each member of the group was given a set of CDs to listen to gain further insight. The group was given a survey of twenty-one questions about the church’s role, the community’s condition and potential actions of both. They completed the survey and brought it with them to the first session. At the first session each participant filled out a consent to participate form. They were told what the study was about and that their input was valuable, and that it would be collected through surveys and recorded conversations. They willingly committed to the process and shared information generously.

The survey served as a good discussion starter for the group. Everyone was encourage to share their ideas and thoughts. There was near unanimity around the connection between faith and mission. The Black Church in general and Pennsylvania Avenue A.M.E. Zion Church in particular has a role and responsibility in serving the community and leading the restoration of the neighborhood. Most of them agreed that the church’s role has decreased in recent years and it is directly related to the deteriorating condition of the community. Both have suffered as a result. The church did not cause the

decline, but it could help stop it. The group shared many reasons for what they perceived was a disconnect between the Church and the community. One person stated, “The church seems ‘too guarded’ and protected from the community.” Another said that the relationship between the church and the community is divided mainly because of class differences. The Church is perceived as a middle-class congregation and the community is perceived as poor and working class. It was pointed out that historically the neighborhood was more middle class, with mostly homeowners and professionals. One person said, “Many preachers are out of touch with the underserved population. It is important for ministers and churches to ask people what they feel they need rather than assume they know what’s best for them.” Most agreed that many churches were providing some programs for the community. A couple of churches were even mentioned for doing community development through housing and a head start center. All agreed that the church could and should do much more.

It was challenging to find dates to meet. There were conflicts at times between the church calendar and individual responsibilities of group members. In fact, the initial goal was to have a group of seven to ten persons. It was hard to get a commitment from that many people. Not all five focus group members who committed were at all the sessions. However, they all shared their input by completing questionnaires and sharing their personal reflections. The discussions were built around the themes of the sermon series, which were: Our Mandate, Our Mission, Our Ministry, Our Mindset, and Our Mutuality. The researcher made a connection between these themes and the Africentric principles of Umoja (Unity), Ujima (Collective Work/Responsibility), Kuumba (Creativity), Kujichagulia (Self-Determination), Nia (Purpose) and Ujamaa (Cooperative

Economics). The seventh principle of Imani (Faith) was interspersed throughout each principle. These themes were not always explicitly stated. But they were implicit throughout the dialogues. The subject of an “Africentric” concept was not at the forefront of the minds of the focus group members. However, most of them agreed that there was something historical, cultural and spiritual that was unique and special about Black people that seems to have been lost in the last couple of generations; that something special was found in this distinctive neighborhood called Upton. There appeared to be remnants of this in our Black churches.

Although every participant displayed a deep concern for the state of the community, they had not experienced a deliberate attempt by the church to connect the Bible and Christian faith with the mandate to transform the community. They had heard sermons and seen some programs that seemed to help people. But there was not a concerted effort to move the congregation into specific, concrete steps that led to comprehensive, grass roots, bottom-up, inclusive community development. One woman was very clear that it was her upbringing in the church and in a family of believers that led her to commit her life to making the community better. She personally became an activist and an advocate. She wanted her church to do the same. Another person said that her faith had motivated her to want to improve her neighborhood. Although she had written at least four resignation letters from her position on the board of the neighborhood association, her faith would not let her walk away.

The Church had done some things in the past but its recent involvement was less than impressive. The Church had a community development corporation that ran some programs. There was an outreach center run from a row house that was donated to the

church. Both were now defunct because of lack of interest and funding. The group thought these programs did some good. All agreed that social services were not enough. There needed to be some major initiative that emanated from the central mission of the church. It was said, “To fulfill its commandment the church should exist externally, outside the sanctuary. The church has to do more than back-to-school festivals, block parties and give-aways. We could use those funds to beautify the neighborhood.” Another said, “We should not have to wait for a back-to-school festival to open our doors to our community. We need to evangelize more and make our voices heard.”

There appeared to be moments of great hope when the group realized the rich resources that were in the room in the form of experiences, networks and connections. The group recognized the possibilities afforded them by virtue of their positions in city and neighborhood agencies. One person who works in the city’s “Vacants to Values” program identified the many vacant properties surrounding the church’s immediate target area that could be acquired for very little money. The researcher is the chair of the neighborhood’s Faith-Based Collaborative and a member of the new Community Churches for Community Development, which helped to secure an economic inclusion plan in connection with the forthcoming State Center government complex to be built in the community. The researcher spent several Tuesday morning breakfasts with the group of pastors committed to implementing a strategic plan for community revitalization that addresses education, employment and housing. He shared some of the strategy and short-term successes of the clergy group. The focus group saw the church and the neighborhood, with its heritage trail and strategic location, as tremendous assets upon which to build a strong and vibrant community. They saw the church as a major player

that could leverage tremendous resources for a comprehensive community development plan.

The final session revealed that the answers to the original questions had become more pointed and definitive. The group began to see a direct correlation between the Christian Gospel and the mission to the community. Several participants stated that the Bible had something to say about the state of our communities. The Church had a responsibility to lead the transformation of the community by leveraging its resources and clout in the city to bring much needed assistance and dramatic change to the neighborhood.

After several sessions, the researcher asked the group if there was something they could do together to make a difference. A couple of people strongly urged the group to come to a consensus around a plan of action to move the Church forward in the area of community development. The group agreed to be board members of a newly reorganized Zion Development Corporation. They would also help recruit additional board members and an advisory board made up of civic and business leaders. They committed to devising an overall strategy of community development that encompassed several blocks of blighted and abandoned properties. They would work together to develop the plan, recruit a developer and secure the funding. The group outlined a preliminary plan that was divided into short-term and long-term strategy. They ended the sessions with a sense of accomplishment and some clear next steps for action.

CHAPTER VI – REFLECTION, SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The process of developing the manual for an Afrocentric praxis model of community development was arduous but very rewarding. The process had some inherent challenges because the researcher asked for volunteers from the pulpit at the beginning of his sermon series, instead of deliberately handpicking some persons. But being unsure of who fit the criteria, i.e. persons who either live in the Upton neighborhood currently or previously lived there, the researcher had to rely on a general appeal. Several persons were moved and seemed interested in the subject matter, but only a few could commit to the meeting schedule. The five who committed proved to be valuable partners. Each of them brought their own experience and expertise to the research. They began the process with many questions. They finished the process providing many answers.

The study began with the hypothesis, the Black Church has become more and more detached (geographically, spiritually and emotionally) and, thus, unresponsive to the social needs of the African American community, especially as it pertains to the physical condition of the neighborhood. The premise was that if there were an

intentional, coordinated program of engagement based on an historical, cultural and spiritual framework that a Black Church would become an intentional agent of neighborhood revitalization and development. Although the storied history of the Black Church includes a most impressive record of providing a myriad of social services ranging from clothes closets and food pantries to schools and housing complexes, it appears as if the deteriorating landscape of many African American neighborhoods has a correlation to the “absence” of Black Churches. This has not only affected the vitality of the neighborhood in which a church or group of churches is located, it has adversely affected the well-being of the church because gainfully employed and spiritually engaged persons are less apt to get involved in a church that is either farther away from their places of residence or lacks the menu of ministry options that a strong church can afford.

The focus group shared that they generally saw the Church as having a responsibility in comprehensive community development. At the onset of the research they believed that this was just something good for the church to do. By the end of the process, they believed that there was a biblical and spiritual mandate to be “repairers of the breach and restorers of the streets to dwell in.” They began the process by identifying some different aspects of civic and community life that the Church could engage. By the end of the process, they had identified a broad-based strategy that could be employed to garner resources and political capital to completely transform a neighborhood.

The conversations helped to bring to the conscious memory of the group the Church’s history in providing some meaningful programs that had helped many children and families. They cited the church’s sponsoring of the Zion Towers senior residences in the 1970s. They talked about the outreach programs offered from the base of the

Carpenter House, a former row house located near the church donated to the church. They also talked about the former vision of the Zion Development Corporation to build a community center and provide a full-range of services. They also began to list the history of a few other church-based initiatives led by other congregations that had made a significant impact at one point or another. However, it became evident that there has been very little collaboration and coordination of a faith-based effort with broad, long-lasting impact.

What became evident is that although the church had done some good things in the community, there has not been an intentional effort to make these initiatives a missional priority. In other words, these programs were appendages, auxiliary and afterthoughts. They were not included in the church's main budget. Key leaders were not assigned to positions of shepherding and supporting these programs. They never really had the conscious endorsement of the church. A reasonable conclusion can be made that the reason community development and empowerment were not lifted up as primary objectives of the church is because they lacked a theological imperative and a cultural connection. The further people moved away from the community, physically and emotionally, the less inclined they were to engage in programs that would directly and forcefully impact the community. The concern was more focused on self-preservation, meeting denominational obligations and maintenance of programs.

The research helped to raise the "antennas" of the focus group as they paid more attention to the church's action or apathy on issues of social and economic justice and the community's ability or inability to provide indigenous means of empowerment for its own residents. It is also more apparent that the investment of the leadership –pastor and

church officials – makes a major difference in how a congregation views its responsible involvement in its neighborhood. If it is preached from the pulpit and pursued in the front pews of the church, it becomes a conscious priority of a congregation.

The process helped the group to see itself as more of an organic part of historic community. The church's history is very much connected to the neighborhood's history. With the passage of time and the lack of members who reside in that neighborhood, the "institutional memory" of the church's involvement in the community is dissipating. Approaching this problem from an Afrocentric perspective helps the Church see time and space from a spiritual aspect that transcends the contemporary experience. An Africentric perspective helps us see our connection to the ancestors who "once went sorrowing here," striving not only to make heaven their home, but to make their home look more like heaven. Doing ministry from an African-centered grounding helps persons to see that the Black church is a part of a continuum, from antiquity to the present, which has transported the values, traditions, and principles of a great people who have embodied the genius of their Creator.

Of course, the development of a curriculum is just a beginning. The praxis aspect of the project is yet to be fully realized. However, the brief experience thus far signals some great possibilities. The focus group initiated the process of revitalizing the church's non-profit corporation, Zion Development Corporation, Inc. This was a major breakthrough. The group committed to being board members and doing the necessary leg-work to get the organization off the ground. They identified several short-term and long-term goals. The short-term goals included: sponsoring a history tour of the sites of the Upton neighborhood; hosting a community gathering in the church; developing and

publishing a community resource directory; sponsoring a fun event, like a Christian comedy show. The long-term goals included: securing and reconstructing a nearby building as a Head Start program in collaboration with the elementary school across the street from the church; establishing a housing cooperative by acquiring a large number of vacant houses under the city's "Vacant to Values" program; provide a homebuyers education program; build a full-service community center – Zion Center; re-open the former Carpenter House to be used for outreach services to the community. The group also identified key civic and government leaders that should be enlisted to provide support and resources for the ZDC. A political strategy was mentioned as a primary objective.

The stated objective of the praxis model was to design a definitive Afrocentric paradigm for community development and empowerment. This aspect of the project was examined and discussed, but was not as explicit as the researcher had intended. Afrocentricism was referenced in every part of the curriculum; but was not presented vehemently as a predominant or critical facet. One could argue that the nature and content of the project implicitly involves an Africentric perspective. It is not clear whether this aspect of the praxis model is a dominant determinant of the effectiveness of this phase of the project. However, this researcher believes that maintaining an Africentric foundation will translate into an organic, cultural spirit of cooperation and collaboration that will transcend the church and transfer power to the most vulnerable members of the African American community.

This praxis model will be useful in the future in several ways. Congregations can use this model to equip its ministers-in-training, leadership officials and students in

Christian education. This model can be expanded and expounded upon in several types of educational and discipleship programs, because it is biblically-based. As the Zion Church seeks to live out its motto of “Making Disciples, Maturing Believers and Multiplying Ministries,” this will become a part of the curriculum of the church’s Zion M.A.D.E. Institute to be used in the leadership track with ministers and leaders. It can become either an initial or ongoing training curriculum for a board of directors of a church’s non-profit or for-profit development or housing cooperative. The curriculum can be a supplement to a comprehensive strategy of training that could include membership in a national organization such as the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA)¹²⁷ or a local faith-based organization such as B.U.I.L.D. (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development).¹²⁸

¹²⁷ The Christian Community Development Association is a consortium of church-based organizations committed to comprehensive community transformation. The organization was founded by Rev. Dr. John Perkins in 1989. See www.ccda.org.

¹²⁸ B.U.I.L.D. is a broad-based, community power organization whose victories range from initiating the national living wage movement to creating Child First, an after-school program that encourages parent-teacher-neighborhood partnerships, to building and rebuilding more than 1,000 houses in Baltimore’s most distressed areas. See www.builtiaf.org.

APPENDIX A

DISCUSSION OUTLINE FOR FOCUS GROUP LESSONS

STANDING ON HOLY COMMON GROUND AN AFROCENTRIC PRAXIS MODEL FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND EMPOWERMENT BIBLE STUDY DISCUSSION GUIDE

INTRODUCTION: The praxis model for empowering the congregation to do community development can be described in five parts: 1. Our mandate; 2. Our mission; 3. Our mindset; 4. Our ministry; 5. Our mutuality. These five parts can be correlated to the seven principles (Nguzu Saba) of Kwanzaa: Umoja, Ujima, Kumbaa, Kujichagulia, Nia, Imani, Ujamaa and Imani.

One of the keys to restoring African American communities is an indigenous cultural and spiritual reconnection with the Black Church, and vice versa. In order for the connection to be authentic, it has to be more than transactional – political or economic. The connection has to be anchored in the recovery of a “holy common ground.” At the center of this “holy common ground” is a truly African spiritual ethos. While many churches have made the overt attempt to infuse Africentrism (to be defined later), most have been drawn to the current evangelical trends that tend to “de-culturalize” and “de-colorize” the Gospel. There appears to be a direct correlation between racial/social integration and the “de-radicalization” of the Black Church, which Gayraud Wilmore refers to as “the process of lessening social and political advocacy of Black ministers and churches in urban areas.”¹²⁹

The specific goal of this work is redress the economic injustice experienced in a poor African American community – the Upton Community – by pursuing a holistic strategy of community development. This is best achieved by empowering people to become self-sufficient through the power of the Gospel. One of the most prolific and effective proponents of Christian (Church-based) Community Development is Rev. John Perkins. Rev. Perkins presents three principles for authentic, grassroots, Christian community development: 1. Relocation: To minister effectively to the poor one must relocate in the community of need. Jesus identified with people’s felt need where they were. 2. Reconciliation: The gospel has the power to reconcile people both to God and to each other. Reconciliation is not an optional aspect of the Gospel. Jesus constantly overcame racial, religious, gender barriers. 3. Redistribution: Christ calls us to share with those in need, redistributing more than our goods.

¹²⁹ Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 2000 (fourth printing).

Socio-economic analysis of Upton/Black Baltimore:

- Black Baltimore, p. 41-44 (History)
- Black Baltimore, p. 100-01 (Hyper-segregation)
- Black Baltimore, p. 103-104 (Redlining)
- Black Baltimore, p. 160-211 (Hope/Pragmatic Potential)
- Not in My Neighborhood, p. 250-253 (“Church Flight”)

Part One: Our Mandate – Ezekiel 37

Our Mandate: Umoja (Unity)

Our mandate is to seek and maintain unity that begins with our relationship with God, affirms our connection to Africa and the Diaspora, and calls forth solidarity among and liberation for all of God’s people.

Thesis : The key to transforming our Communities (Dry Bones) is a life-transforming experience with the Holy Spirit. That Spirit in turn will lead us to speak a Word of New Life. Although it looks dire, drear, and dry we still have an obligation to say something to the bones. Relevant Proclamation is contingent upon proximity and sensitivity, which leads to receptivity and connectivity.

God sensitizes the prophet by sending him to the Valley. He doesn’t do it to peak his curiosity but to raise his conscience. You don’t have anything to SAY if you haven’t had anything to SEE. I am not sure if you realized it lately, but we are in the Valley.

Dr. King’s quote: “Any religion that professes to be concerned about the soul, but is unconcerned about the conditions that damage the soul is a dry-as-dust religion.”

In this text we can discern three types of Dry Bones:

- 1. Dead – Spiritually Lifeless; Soulless**
- 2. Despondent and Dejected:** They have suffered so much loss. Their community has been systemically underdeveloped and disenfranchised for so long that they’ve given up hope of ever being revived. They have become hopeless because of the continual systemic economic injustice: inferior services, schools, and resources.
- 3. Disassembled and Dispersed:** They have been torn asunder as a community. Their families have deteriorated. Their kinship ties are dwindling. Their neighborly ties are diminishing. They are disconnected from each other, from God, from community and the Church. Isolation and separation has become normal.

As the Church of Jesus Christ, and as proclaimers of the Gospel, the Good News, God is calling us to say something. I would like to suggest to you there are THREE interrelated ways that we can say something, based on the experience of the prophet Ezekiel.

STRATEGY:**1. REVIEW THE SETTING (PASTORAL): Verses 1-3**

- a. A Strategic Plan begins with care and sensitivity to the context
- b. God began with moving (physically and spiritually) the “Pastor”
- c. A word of encouragement
- d. We are Shepherds and not hirelings (read Ezekiel 34:11-16)
- e. Dwight L. Moody once said, “There are a good many lean sheep in God’s fold, but not in his pasture.”
- f. We have to say something because we have a PASTORAL OBLIGATION

2. RESPOND TO THE SITUATION (PRIESTLY): Verse 4-8

- a. Stop Judging the Bones (“These bones probably got what they deserved.”)
- b. Stop stigmatizing and marginalizing the Bones (“They belong in the Valley.”)
- c. Stop Paternalizing the Bones (“You bones sure are sorry. You need me to help me you.”)
- d. Speak to the Bones
- e. Healing – restoration and regeneration (verse 5-6)
- f. A ministry of encouragement
- g. We have to say something because we have a PRIESTLY OBLIGATION

3. RESTATE THE SOLUTION (PROPHETIC): Verses 9-10

- a. Engage the powers that be. Do not be disengaged and disconnected from the living reality of the people and the forces that afflict our people.
- b. We have to say something because we have a PROPHETIC OBLIGATION
- c. The Bones had form, but did not have power
- d. The Problem is our dry bones have aggregated and assimilated, but have not activated
- e. If our dry bones could ever connect with the community’s dry bones, we could be a great army.

Questions for Reflection:

- Think about and discuss ways that our congregation can use Bible study centered on the Jewish experience of exile, disconnectedness and dispersion to open the way for deeper understanding about what it means to be an African in Diaspora and a Black Christian in Baltimore.
- Discuss and create a plan for a series of churchwide studies (for adults, youth and children) on specific places in the Diaspora, the United States and greater Baltimore that will create a greater awareness of our congregation's Unity and a stronger commitment to working with others for liberation and empowerment.
- Find persons in the congregation who were raised or lived in the Upton Community. Invite them to share their own personal experiences and help the congregation as it explores the historical, geographical, political and cultural background of this community in relation to other communities.

PART TWO: Our Mission – Isaiah 58

Our Mission: *Ujima* (Collective work/Responsibility) and *Kuumba* (Creativity)

Our mission is to build and maintain our communities as Africans in Diaspora who live in a context of service and mutual accountability in America and the world, strengthened by the liberation spirit of God (*Ujima*); and to ground our creative energy in a renewed and renewing relationship with God that restores our African American communities and creates new possibilities for commitment to the Diaspora and the world for the benefit of all people (*Kuumba*).

Today like 8th Century Israelites we are facing the challenge of our era. We cannot see our future without facing our past. The space we occupy is on the axis of a spinning tower that is viewing the remnants of a once stable and desirable neighborhood. What has happened in our community, to our people, is objectionable and abhorrent. We are like exiles returning to our own land but not recognizing where we are. The landscape has been scorched and the horizon has been ransacked. What was a “promised land” in the great Black migration of the 20th century has become a “wasteland” in the so-called “post-racial” 21st century.

THESIS: There is a major divide between the Black Church and African American Community. We need to construct a bridge that reconnects the Church and the Community into one unified yet diverse whole. The mission of transforming African American communities in inner cities must involve recapturing our African spirituality in a contemporary context. This is a two-fold venture. On the one-hand it involves *reconciling* the rupturing relationship between the Black Church and the Black community. On the other hand it involves *restoring* a sense of “communality” that is central to African and African American identity. Reconciliation must first involve acknowledgement of a fault and/or violation of the relationship before forgiveness and resolution can occur. In this sense the Black Church can be prophetic in calling out the “sin” of its own negligence and apathy toward the suffering of the Black Community.

The Black Church can also be priestly in bringing about healing and reconciliation by extending compassion and concern for the well-being of the victimized and the vulnerable. **Rebuilding, Repairing and Restoring** are CREATIVE (Kuumba) acts of the Church.

Chapter 58 is a call for a true fast: Reconciliation

1. REBUILD THE CHURCH (SPIRITUAL) (Build the old waste places)

- a. You know it's hard to see the need for remodeling in your own home when you stay in it all the time. You get used to disorder and disrepair.**
- b.** Isaiah says God's first issue is with the Church. While we're spending so much time passing judgment on the world, we need to see the mote in our own eye.
- c.** We must take this unique opportunity to reevaluate our relationship with God and our job performance as it relates to our mission.
- d.** Bishop Walter Scott Thomas really challenged me when he asked the question, "Is there anything going on in your church today that is worth Jesus dying for?"
- e.** Confess our sins, repent, seek forgiveness and reconciliation.
- f.** I know charity begins at home, but so does judgment.
- g.** The answer to rebuilding is found in verses 6-9
 - i.** The church has almost become a spiritual waste place – the remains of once great movement.
 - ii.** But thank God, there is still a foundation to build on!
- h.** Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Hell is knocking on the doors of the Church. And maybe some doors need to be knocked in. And maybe some walls need to be broken down. But that's alright, 'cause we've got a firm foundation. "On Christ the solid rock I stand..."

2. REPAIR THE CHASM (Repairer of the Breach)

- a.** There has been a major break, a violation, an egregious error
- b.** There is a rift in our relationship between the Church and the Community; a separation that is spiritual, cultural and moral.

The Bridge Builder

An old man, going a lone highway,
Came, at the evening, cold and gray,
To a chasm, vast, and deep, and wide,
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.

The old man crossed in the twilight dim;
The sullen stream had no fear for him;
But he turned, when safe on the other side,
And built a bridge to span the tide.

"Old man," said a fellow pilgrim, near,
"You are wasting strength with building here;
Your journey will end with the ending day;
You never again will pass this way;
You've crossed the chasm, deep and wide-
Why build you this bridge at the evening tide?"

The builder lifted his old gray head:
"Good friend, in the path I have come," he said,
"There followeth after me today,
A youth, whose feet must pass this way.

This chasm, that has been naught to me,
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him."

c. We must be bridge-builders

3. RESTORE THE COMMUNITY (SOCIAL) (The Restorer of Streets to Dwell in)

- a. The Message translation says: You'll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again.
- b. We should be known as restorers. This is the year of recovery.
- c. What does a restored community look like? (Harlem Children's Zone)
- d. What does Zion mean?

"If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray..." 2 Chronicles 7:14

**“How to reach the masses men of every birth; for an answer, Jesus gave the Key...”
He said, If I, If I be lifted up from the earth, I’ll draw all men unto me**

O the world is hungry for the living bread...

Lift Him up. Lift Him up. Still he speaks from eternity...

Questions for Reflection:

- What are some of the ways that our congregation has experienced Collective Work/Responsibility? What are some ways we can experience that in our broader community or neighborhood?
- Think of ways that collective efforts in our congregation’s ministries have been difficult? What do you think are the sources of these difficulties and how can they be addressed?
- What are some ways that we can work in more collective and responsible partnership with each other and with our community?
- What are some of the areas in our congregational life where restoration and revitalization are needed? What are some of the barriers preventing these changes and how they can be addressed?
- What are some of the areas in our community where our congregation can become a “repairer of the breach?”
- What new levels of faith commitment are required, both individually and collectively, for such a change and how can they be supported and sustained?

Part Three: Our Mindset – Nehemiah 4:1-20

Our Mindset: Kujichagulia (Self-Determination)

Our mindset is to define ourselves as daughters and sons of Africa in America, created in the image of God, and willing to participate in the liberation of those in the Diaspora and the world.

Thesis: Our community has suffered because we have turned a jaundice eye and a deaf ear to the plight of our land. It has become “out of sight, out of mind.”

Nehemiah was the catalyst for the change, the leader of the movement and the spokesman for the nation, but the wall was rebuilt and the community was transformed because the people had a mind to work. We need some Nehemiah’s who have succeeded, gotten education, who have access to resources – financial and human – who will be sensitized to the plight of our community. We need some Nehemiahs who will not just pray and pontificate, but who will prophesy and testify, worship and work, fast and fight, to rebuild the walls of this community.

A Builder Or a Wrecker?

As I watched them tear a building down
 A gang of men in a busy town
 With a ho-heave-ho, and a lusty yell
 They swung a beam and the side wall fell

I asked the foreman, "Are these men skilled,
 And the men you'd hire if you wanted to build?"
 He gave a laugh and said, "No, indeed,
 Just common labor is all I need."

"I can easily wreck in a day or two,
 What builders have taken years to do."
 And I thought to myself, as I went my way
 Which of these roles have I tried to play?

Am I a builder who works with care,
 Measuring life by rule and square?
 Am I shaping my work to a well-made plan
 Patiently doing the best I can?

Or am I a wrecker who walks to town
 Content with the labor of tearing down?
 "O Lord let my life and my labors be
 That which will build for eternity!"

The Profile of the Kinds of Opposition faced by Builders

Blockers
 Wreckers
 Fence-sitters

"When evil men plot, good men must plan. When evil men burn and bomb, good men must build and bind. When evil men shout ugly words of hatred, good men must commit themselves to the glories of love." Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Three Points:

1. Internal Fortitude

- a. Spiritual Strength
- b. Emotional Maturity
- c. Moral Responsibility
- d. A Mighty Fortress is Our God
- e. No other foundation can any man lay, except that which is laid...

2. External Focus

- a. The Church is suffering from “navel-gazing,” looking at ourselves
- b. You cannot be obsessed with the obvious. You cannot be confused by the concession.
- c. You need some folk who will be camped on the wall looking at what on the outside. We need some folk who are circumference on the camp
- d. We need some folk who can do a socio-political critique of the condition of the community

3. Eternal Favor

- a. Nehemiah had favor with another King
- b. Nehemiah was resourceful because of his connection to the King
- c. Nehemiah’s earthly favor was coupled with the heavenly, eternal favor of the King of Kings
- d. When you have favor of the King you can say, “I’m doing a great work and I can’t come down!” That gains more favor with the King.

Part Four: Our Ministry – Luke 4:16-22

Our Ministry: Nia (Purpose)

Our ministry is to build and develop our communities in ways that acknowledge the sacredness of our collective work of liberation in the Diaspora and the world and our dependence on God’s power and grace to perform it.

I am seeing the 4th Chapter of Luke this week with fresh eyes. I’ve seen something in the text that I’ve never seen before. The chapter begins with the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness and ends with the first threat on Jesus’ life after His prophetic proclamation of His mission to preach good news to the poor. What I saw encapsulated in this chapter for the first time is that before you can accept your mission and fulfill your mission to do ministry on holy common ground in the community and in the world you’ve got to deal with your demons on two fronts: your personal demons and your religious demons. My good friend Dr. Raphael Warnock, the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta, and former pastor of Douglas Community Church here in Baltimore, helped me this week at the Morehouse preaching festival when he dealt with the first part of Luke 4.¹³⁰ You have to resist three carnal impulses. You see before he could begin his ministry, Christ had to deal with Jesus. You make think this homiletical heresy or theological blasphemy, but I just believe that the Savior had to deal with him Self before he could save others.

¹³⁰ Rev. Dr. Raphael G. Warnock. Sermon preached at Martin Luther King, Jr. Chapel, Morehouse College, April 4, 2011.

Resist the narrow impulse to self-service. (Turn stones into bread) When Jesus makes bread it isn't for himself. The temptation is to make *A (one)* loaf of bread. Jesus is concerned with the multitude.

Resist the narcissistic impulse to self-aggrandizement. (Bow down and worship the devil and all this will be yours.) It can never be about you. Don't make a deal with the devil just to get what you want. The glory goes to God, not to self. "Get behind me Satan!"

Resist the non-sensical impulse to self-destruction. (Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple). You're better off dealing with the demons while you're on the ground. In order, to do ministry on holy common ground you've got to get over yourself.

The second half of the chapter is the answer to the devilish and demonic tendencies of carnal people (Beginning with verses 16-18)

1. **Receive A Priestly Call:** "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach Good News to the poor." The anointing is a sign of God's blessing, power and authority. It is not a call to domination or superiority. It is a call to service. It flows from the head to keep you from getting full of yourself. And flows to the feet to keep you humble and remind you to serve.
2. **Reveal A Prophetic Claim:** (verses 18-19) This was radical stuff. He identified the victims and the vulnerable. His concern was not for pity and sympathy but for empowerment and liberation. (The New Jim Crow) This was about systems and powers, not about programs.
3. **Report A Personal Conviction:** (verses 20-22) He read the Scripture and he closed the book. HE was no longer repeating what was in the book. He stating what was in His heart.
4. **Rebuff A Public Challenge:** (verses 28-30) The people will turn on you when you call them out.

CLOSING ILLUSTRATION

I was in a gang when I was a child. But it wasn't like gangs today. My gang was more like Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids. We had someone like Rudy, we had a Mushmouth, and a Bill and a Russell. And we had a Fat Albert, but his name was Tyrone. He was my friend. I slept over his house and he slept over mine. And we all played ball together. We played hardball on the sandlot and whiffle ball on the parking lot. But Tyrone and his brother Jimmy signed up for the Joe DiMaggio little league and I decided to sign up too. I never played on a team in an organized league before, but I had dreamed of playing on a real team. My hero was Jim Rice and I imitated him. I held the bat like him. I stood like him at plate. I dreamed of hitting mammoth home runs like Jim Rice, but the problem was I about my youngest son, John-Charles' size, short and skinny. I was built for speed, not power. But I signed up anyhow and Tyrone and I had a problem. We got picked for different teams. And as you would know, we had to face each other. And my most memorable game was against Tyrone's team. He was the catcher for his team. And the game was tied and I was up at bat. I stood like Jim Rice even though I looked more like Ozzie Smith. And I got a pitch I could hit...

The third base coach was trying to give me the hold sign, but I ran right through it because I wanted a Home Run and to score the winning run.

But Tyrone had gotten the ball by the time I got halfway down the line. He was my friend, but he was on the wrong team. I liked him, but he was on the wrong team...

There are some folks who will be in your way and they are not on your team. Jesus was faced with folk in the temple who may have been nice folks, but they had on a different uniform. Don't be dissuaded or discouraged. If God be for you, who can be against you!

Part Five – Our Mutuality (Acts 2: 41-47)

Our Mutuality: Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics)

Our mutuality is the belief in and demonstration of a holistic, multidimensional stewardship that values all of our mutual resources, including material, human, intellectual, and spiritual gifts, as blessings to us from God to be developed and used in African American communities, the Diaspora, and the world for the good of all people.

1. Reassess Our Priorities

Spring Inventory

Jesus had taught the Disciples a new code of ethics: Love God with all your heart....and love your NEIGHBOR as you love yourself. Not about retaliation, retribution and reprimand. But it's about reconciliation and restoration.

Three Simple Rules: Do no harm, Do good, Stay in love with God

2. Reallocate Our Possessions

They had all things in COMMON. There is too much pressure to acquire possessions, protect possessions, maintain possessions, insure possessions... We need to reinvest in our communities. The money in the African American community does not circulate more than once.

3. Re-establish Our Partnerships

As Mutual Beings we are establish relationships and alliances that edify the body and bring the greatest good to the society

Look at Acts 3: Peter and John bury their hatchet and re-establish their partnership because they were empowered by the Holy Ghost. They were no longer in competition, but in collaboration. They were no longer jockeying for position, but they were joined in purpose.

They told the man, "Silver and gold we do not have...." Not because they didn't want to share. But because they had more than that to give him.
Give a man fish you feed him for a day...

In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk

We need to rebuke the poverty pimps, and stop giving people a handout, but a hand up

Examples: Credit unions, housing coops, food coops, schools, job training, job creation

APPENDIX B**PRE-TEST/FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name

STANDING ON HOLY COMMON GROUND**Preliminary Questionnaire¹³¹**

1. The Black Church, especially in urban areas, historically has been an “all-comprehending institution” (Lewis Baldwin), providing an array of human services for residents of the community. Does the Church still have a responsibility for these services? Why or why not?

2. What do the Black Church and the African American community have in common other than racial identity? In your opinion, has the relationship between the two become divided, divorced and/or diminished over the last twenty to thirty years? How so?

¹³¹ Adapted in part from, *Urban Churches, Vital Signs*, Nile Harper, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999 and *Living God's Politics: A Guidebook for Putting Your Faith into Action*, Jim Wallis and Chuck Gutenson, New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

18. What human resources are in this community? Who are some key leaders, talented and skilled people, persons with special experience, long-time residents who know the community's history, younger persons with energy, middle-aged persons with useful connections, political figures, clergy, local business owners, school principals and teachers, leaders of voluntary organizations and service clubs? Make a list of five or six persons in the community who might be helpful in engaging the challenges facing this area.
19. What are some of the service and information resources within this community – for example, school librarians, city librarians, city government agencies, social welfare agencies, police department, fire department, college faculty and research institutes, federal census reports, city planning documents, clergy, regional planning bodies, computer internet, local and regional newspapers? To what extent has the Church used these information resources to promote adult education, mission planning, and thinking about assets?

20. What potential partnerships, locally or regionally, might our Church be able to create in the Greater Baltimore metropolitan area? Who might have knowledge, skill, experience, financial assets, political connections, and a willingness to join with us in doing new things to meet human needs? Make a list of five or six such persons or institutions where such persons might be found.
21. What foundations, corporations, government agencies, and other voluntary organizations can you identify that could be invited to become partners in working for positive change and greater social justice? Make a list of five to ten such potential partners.

APPENDIX C

Results of the Field Experience

The Pre-Test/Survey was conducted during the week of June 5, prior to the first session. The focus group members were given the test to take home and complete. All members participated in the survey by sharing their own thoughts, feelings and perceptions based on the questions presented. There was unanimity on the fact that the Black Church should be involved in the effort to revitalize the community. The general consensus was that the Black Church has played an important and indispensable in the life of African Americans, although that role seems to be diminishing. The group believed that an increased and intentional role of the church in community development should be welcomed, supported and encouraged.

On Questions 1 and 2, the group agreed that the Black Church has a responsibility to provide an array of services. This would help to fix what was perceived as a divide between the Black Church and its surrounding African American community. One person stated,

The relationship between the Church and African American community had divided and offers an opportunity for reconciliation. Over the last twenty years, I've seen growth (in a genuine sense) and defeat. The Black Church seems to have succumbed to heavy advertising, marketing and media. I oftentimes justify it. However it's just something about having a clock on the pulpit for taping scheduling purposes. The Black Church tends to represent themselves in guarded and protected "from" the community. The growth is seen in the programs and ministries needed to help the community, such as providing a nearby venue for counseling and assistance.

On Questions 3 and 4, the group agreed that the Bible instructed Christians to address the needs of the neighborhood, especially for those persons who are most needy and vulnerable. One person said,

The Bible and the Church are structured to address the needs of all people, but many of the messengers (preachers) are out of touch with underserved. It is important to ask a people what they feel they need, rather than assume one knows what's best for them.

Another person said,

Yes, the Bible and the Church instructs leaders today to address the needs of people in the "ghetto." The Bible has many passages that teach how to help and then one should help others. I've read passages that state giving to those with less than you is something we should do. One of my favorite passages is 1 John 3:17, "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?"

On questions 5 and 6, the group cited ways that the Church has been involved in the community in the past and suggested more ways to impact the lives of residents. It was said,

We should not have to wait for a "Back to School Festival" to open our doors to our community. I think we need to evangelize more, make our voices heard.

Another person added,

The Church is doing the work of reconciliation and transformation. Working with the local school system, supporting development that will result in better jobs, housing and schools and lifting its youth to know Christ and pursue their dreams are many of the common themes in our Black Church. Many of the churches now offer mental and drug abuse counseling, teen and other ministries to empower the community and assist those that wish to be free. Unfortunately, until you visit the church or meet a member that loves the church and shares a testimony, these aspects are not as highlighted as they could be.

Moving to questions 9 and 10, it was observed that there is little economic investment and ownership in the African American community. Businesses are not owned by African American. Access to good, quality, affordable housing is seen as minimal by most. One respondent stated,

None of the 98% revenue from goods and services produced in our community gets reinvested within the community, and that is because we do not require it. The would benefit from becoming a community benefits district as well as implementation of a merchants organization.

The access to good, quality, affording housing as owners or renters is bountiful, but the behavior of the community has to change to where the residents “own” their neighborhood. This entails keeping the streets litter free, trimming trees, being respectful of noise levels, and taking care of your property whether you rent or purchase.

All of the respondents were aware of their local and state elected representatives, listing the names in question 11. They believed that all of them could do more. It was said,

Our city, state and federal representatives have to be asked consistently to step forward (following the election). While I could sound pretty bitter because of all the action and resources I see poured into neighborhoods that are already overflowing with help, I will some credit to our elected officials for a few successes. Our relationship with the state government needs to improve quickly. The area is not “just historic” when you need a historic reference for a speech. There are people living here and paying taxes.

Our community has become complacent. We need to ask the right people, the right questions. When they direct us to a social service program or suggest we take nickels for a job that needs dollars, we (our collective community) do not stand together. We await that one spokesperson (typically self-appointed) to lay it on the line. Some of the ways the church has affected how I act and think about government...well I respect a faith leader that knows the word “team” and will work with the community to push government like a tool instead of an institution that cannot change.

Each of the focus group members was able to talk about ways that they have the community change over the last ten to thirty years, citing the exodus of “Black flight”, the closing of recreation centers, and the loss of a sense of community. One person said,

Our people left. I’ve read the findings of the “More in the Middle” study (conducted by Associated Black Charities⁰ and have seen the data that shows the “Black Flight” to the county for safety, better schools, etc. As a parent, wife and child of senior parents, I understand wanting a safe environment for family. I have no frustration with their choice to leave. However, there is still a connection, be it their church home or alma mater, or good memories – help us come back to a stronger neighborhood. Embrace more of the community than just your cross streets. The church has responded to the loss and could do more

to help. The Church can and has remained in the neighborhood, often times regardless of the majority of members that no longer walk or live near the place they worship.

In questions 17 and 18, the group members listed the resources, human and physical, that are available in the community. The historic buildings and rich heritage of the neighborhood was lifted up. The Upton neighborhood is cited as one of the most historic Black communities in the country. This should be taught more to children and residents of the community by the churches, schools, and neighborhood associations. The group felt this fact was a tremendous asset for the community.

The remaining questions involved specific services, resources and partnerships that exist within and without the community. It was the consensus of the group that the resources were underutilized. One person suggested “the church must first conduct an assessment of what currently exists in the community. This assessment should be done among the faith-based community. After this is complete then the creation of partnerships can begin.”

At the conclusion of the research, the group considered most of the questions listed in the survey. Not much changed in their perceptions of the church, the character of the community and the needs to be addressed. However, more clarity and focus was brought to bear on the issues and strategies that could be addressed from a faith-based perspective.

The group shared ideas during the research that culminated in an action plan. The researcher saw this as a major breakthrough for the group. This has tremendous potential for the church’s future involvement in the community and the community’s potential revitalization.

APPENDIX D

City of Baltimore “Vacants to Values” Program

Mayor Announces “Vacants to Value” Plan to Reduce Blight¹³²



Initiative is projected to trigger rehabilitation of more than 1,000 vacant buildings and leverage \$70 million in private investment.

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake joined Baltimore Housing Commissioner Paul Graziano to announce a new integrated effort to reduce vacant housing and urban blight in Baltimore. As a result of one of the largest percentage declines in population among major U.S. cities from 1950 to 2000, Baltimore is now challenged with approximately 16,000 vacant buildings, roughly 25% of which are city owned. Baltimore Housing estimates that more than 5,700 of the vacant structures are in areas with existing or emerging development demand.

Mayor Rawlings-Blake said reductions in crime and improved public schools, have made it more attractive, in recent years, for families to relocate to and remain in Baltimore. She said City government must do “everything it can to spur growth and reinvestment” by:

- Streamlining the sale of vacant city property.
- Strengthening code enforcement efforts in transitional blocks and emerging markets to promote rehabilitation.
- Providing new, targeted incentives for homebuyers and developers who invest in vacant homes. The package of incentives includes a new \$5000 forgivable loan program for City Police, Firefighters, and Teachers that purchase or rehabilitate vacant homes.

¹³² City of Baltimore Department of Housing and Community Development, www.baltimorehousing.org.

Mayor Rawlings-Blake outlined a detailed 6-point strategy to reduce blight, which is projected to cut the transactional time of selling city property by two-thirds, increase the number of vacant city properties sold, and commence rehabilitation of more than a thousand vacant buildings within first year of the program.

“The simple truth is that urban blight in Baltimore is a problem of too much supply and not enough demand,” Mayor Rawlings-Blake said. “That’s why the 6-point plan to address blight that I’m unveiling today recognizes and respects the role of the marketplace, and ensures that City Government is positioned to facilitate and drive targeted reinvestment. The six strategies are fully integrated, and one city agency will be responsible—improving accountability, efficiency and transparency.”

Strategy 1: Streamline the Disposition of City Property

“First, City Government will get its own house in order so that we can efficiently dispose of City-owned property and get it into the hands of those both willing and able to renovate and invest,” Rawlings-Blake said. The mayor announced a total restructuring of Land Resources staff and business processes at Baltimore Housing, including a new Deputy Commissioner for Land Resources and a newly-hired team of experienced real estate marketing professionals. Mayor Rawlings-Blake also said the team will launch a new website to help market and sell vacant city property more effectively.

Mayor Rawlings-Blake unveiled new policy reforms approved by the City’s Board of Estimates today, including: a new uniform appraisal policy, a new sale by live auction process, consolidation of property inventory into one agency, and an expedited lien abatement process. Taken together, the policy reforms are expected to reduce transactional time by at least two-thirds.

“Markets and investors need and deserve more transparency and predictability with these transactions. With these new policies in place, they will have it,” Mayor Rawlings-Blake said. “This strategy alone will increase the number of city properties marketed and ready for purchase and ultimately increase the number of city properties sold.”

Strategy 2: Streamline the Code Enforcement on Transitional Blocks

Mayor Rawlings-Blake said the administration has improved code enforcement efforts on “Transitional Blocks”, areas that are mostly occupied but challenged by a number of scattered vacant structures. Of the 16,000 vacant buildings in Baltimore, almost a third, 5000, are located in these areas, according to a Baltimore Housing market analysis. Baltimore Housing will implement an automated enforcement regime issuing \$900 fines to promote rehabilitation of vacant structures instead of pursuing costly and slow legal battles with landowners by taking each case to court.

Mayor Rawlings-Blake said the new targeted code enforcement effort “will pressure absentee landowners and speculators to do a cost/benefit analysis and either reinvest in their properties to avoid more fines or sell them to someone who will. Because this effort is primarily targeted in areas with development demand, when properties turnover or if a landowner chooses to reinvest, there is an existing market for the properties.”

Strategy 3: Facilitate Investment in Emerging Markets:

The “Vacants to Value” program will deploy expert code enforcement attorneys to facilitate investment in emerging markets near areas of strength. There are roughly 700+ vacant buildings in emerging markets, according to a Baltimore Housing market analysis. “Emerging markets are areas where smaller private and nonprofit developers believe they can make a difference,” Mayor Rawlings-Blake said. “The City will work in partnership with committed and capitalized developers to leverage reinvestment, block by block, without major taxpayer subsidies.”

Strategies 2 and 3 alone will promote rehabilitation of more vacant, boarded buildings than any previous blight elimination program to date and will trigger the rehabilitation of more than a thousand vacant buildings in the first year of the program, according to Baltimore Housing projections.

Strategy 4: Homebuyer and Developer Incentives

The Rawlings-Blake administration has created a new package of targeted incentives for homeowners and developers who renovate vacant properties, including an allocation of \$500 thousand to a new incentive called the Good Neighbors Program, which provides a \$5000 five-year forgivable loan for 100 City Police Officers, Firefighters, and Teachers who purchase a vacant property in Baltimore. This incentive will assist buyers with down payment and closing costs.

Additionally, Baltimore Housing has packaged four more homebuyer incentives, totaling roughly \$1 million, for individuals who purchase vacant or newly-rehabilitated homes. “In total, the programs will provide up to 300 homebuyers a real, tangible incentive to invest in Baltimore,” Mayor Rawlings Blake said. Baltimore Housing will also establish a new \$1 million revolving loan fund to provide short term liquidity for small developers and contractors who rehabilitate vacant properties in emerging markets and transitional blocks.

Strategy 5: Support Large-Scale Redevelopment in Distressed Areas

Over the past decade, the City, working with private and public partners, has embarked on a number of large scale redevelopment such as EBDI, Uplands, Barclay, Poppleton, and Orchard Ridge that are transforming Baltimore’s landscape for the better. Major redevelopments are important because they have a ripple effect that goes beyond their individual boundaries and spur reinvestment in surrounding neighborhoods.

“Neighborhoods that were once called the ‘badlands’ are now shining beacons of hope, brimming with new investment,” Mayor Rawlings-Blake said. “My administration will continue to support large-scale redevelopment efforts in very distressed areas without current market demand. This is a strategy where smart planning, government intervention, and private/public partnerships are absolutely necessary.”

Strategy 6: Maintain, Clear and “Land Bank” for Interim and Future Use

In areas where the scale of blight far exceeds development demand for housing for the foreseeable future, Baltimore Housing will focus on maintaining, clearing and holding—or “land banking”—vacant property for future use. The strategy includes targeted demolition, boarding and cleaning, and creative interim uses including creating new community green space where demand for housing doesn’t yet exist.

Mayor Rawlings-Blake said local government and local investors alone cannot address large scale urban blight and support of state and federal government is critical. Mayor Rawlings-Blake pledged to use her position on the U.S. Conference of Mayors Task Force on Vacant and Abandoned Properties to lobby the federal government for capital support for acquisition and demolition of vacant houses and blight in American cities.

Vacants to Value Homebuyer Program

The Vacants to Value Program is a new City initiative to encourage the purchase of City owned vacant properties, City government must do everything it can to spur growth and reinvestment by:

- streamlining the sale of vacant city property.
- strengthening the code enforcement efforts in transitional blocks and emerging markets to promote rehabilitation.
- providing new targeted incentives for homebuyers and developers who invest in vacant homes.

The following are current adjustments to the Citys Incentive Programs to meet the demands of the Vacants to Value Program. The Homeownerships Policy and Procedure applies to all programs.

Buying Into Baltimore

\$200,000 has been dedicated for this Vacants to Values initiative. A borrower utilizing the Buying Into Baltimore Incentive Program to purchase a City owned property will receive a \$5,000 deferred loan. The property must be owner occupied.

Community Development Block Grant

\$300,000 of Block Grant funds has been dedicated for this Vacants to Value initiative. This amount can fund up to 60 deferred loans at \$5,000 for those who qualify according to HUDs Community Development Block Grant Program regulations. The Buyer can only use these funds to purchase a rehabbed vacant home from a Developer.

Live Near Your Work Program

\$200,000 has been dedicated for this Vacants to Value initiative. Utilizing this Employer Matching Program, the City will match the employers contribution up to \$3,000, netting the employee a \$6,000 incentive. The employee must purchase a City owned vacant property within the employers program boundaries. The employee must further occupy this property as their primary residence.

New Programs

Vacants to Value Booster Program

The program will offer \$10,000 in down payment and closing cost assistance to the first 50 buyers of qualified Vacants to Value properties. This program is offered in addition to other Vacants to Value homeownership incentives, traditional homeownership incentive programs, and property tax credits.

Good Neighbors Program

\$500,000 has been allocated to this program for all City employees to purchase one of the City's vacant properties. This is a \$5,000 deferred loan that dissolves at a rate of 20% per year for 5 years. The allocated amount is enough to assist 100 applicants.

APPENDIX E

Promise Heights Memorandum of Understanding

Promise Heights Neighborhood

Preliminary Memorandum of Understanding

This Preliminary Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) details the University of Maryland's proposed partnership with five target schools, state and local governmental agencies, 14 community and faith based partners to plan and implement Promise Heights (PH), a Promise Neighborhood in Baltimore City, Maryland. Promise Heights is located in the Upton/Druid Heights communities and it encompasses census tracks 1402, 1403, 1702 and 1703.

The mission of Promise Heights is to create a comprehensive child, family, and community building model in West Baltimore communities of Upton and Druid Heights that provides children ages 0-21 with educational, social, physical, and economic opportunities which allow them to thrive and succeed in work and family life. To assist in that vision we agree intentionally, meaningfully, and strategically to coordinate services, strategies, goals, data, and accountability, and use technology to seamlessly communicate and connect in a way that drives performance. We will create a data sharing plan that allows all partners to utilize evidence based services and to link the interventions to services provided to children and families. All partners will commit to work with the National Evaluator to ensure that all data is collected with fidelity and to respond to engage in productive dialogue between partners and the National Evaluator.

Our *theory of action* for this project is that developing a collaborative coalition of PH service providers will strategically change the way organizations work together to focus their efforts to achieve measurable education and health outcomes for children and youth in the community. We understand that success for children in the PH communities requires integration of family, educational, service programs and community systems to create quality responsive programming, documentation of what works and modifications to increase success, and collaborative supportive efforts between all entities interested in the success of children.

The PH community partner's *theory of change* asserts that change for children and families must involve mobilization of an extraordinarily broad and diverse range of resources: families; religious groups; media; community and neighborhood associations; PTAs; the business and philanthropic communities; and public and private agencies in the areas of education, health, social services and employment and training. Change involves transforming the inputs that all children receive to ensure that all children achieve, early and intermediate outcomes needed to ultimately realize higher education and employment success. Beyond mobilizing public and private resources, there must be sustained and coordinated planning, program and policy developments, service delivery and monitoring.

The partners and UM are in agreement that the work of this project will be framed by the indicators that we have jointly identified for each of the following outcomes:

- Children enter kindergarten ready to learn
- Students are proficient in core academic subjects
- Students successfully transition from middle school grades to high school
- Youth graduate from high school
- High school graduates obtain a postsecondary degree, certification, or credential
- Students are healthy
- Students feel safe at school and in their community
- Students live in stable communities
- Families and community members support learning in PN schools
- Students have access to 21st century learning tools

The advisory board will work together to create a seamless pipeline of integrated services, break down service delivery silos, create plans to enhance service delivery to meet community needs, identify neighborhood needs and service delivery gaps and fill these holes with effective programs.

The PH Advisory Board subject to the MOU commits participants to full, regular exchange of information and discussion of relevant program and policy issues. The Board includes community residents, community partner agencies, and public officials representing: Office of the Mayor, Baltimore City Public Schools, F.L. Templeton Preparatory Academy, Samuel C. Taylor Elementary School, Baltimore City Department of Social Services, Maryland State Department of Education, Family League of Baltimore City, Druid Heights Community Development Corporation, Upton Planning Committee, Community Churches for Community Development, Associated Black Charities, United Way of Central Maryland, University of Maryland Medical Center, and the University of Maryland, Baltimore.

The PH lead agency will be the University of Maryland, Baltimore located less than one mile from PH. The six schools of the University (Medical, Dental, Nursing, Law, Pharmacy, and Social Work) will continue to provide a range of services to the community. The lead agency will build on these services to provide administrative support to the initiative; build collaborative data and evaluation systems; convene meetings of project partners; use knowledge of evidence supported practices to inform the provision of proven effective service solution; and garner support from city, state, local, and federal entities to bring resources to the Promise Heights initiative.

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